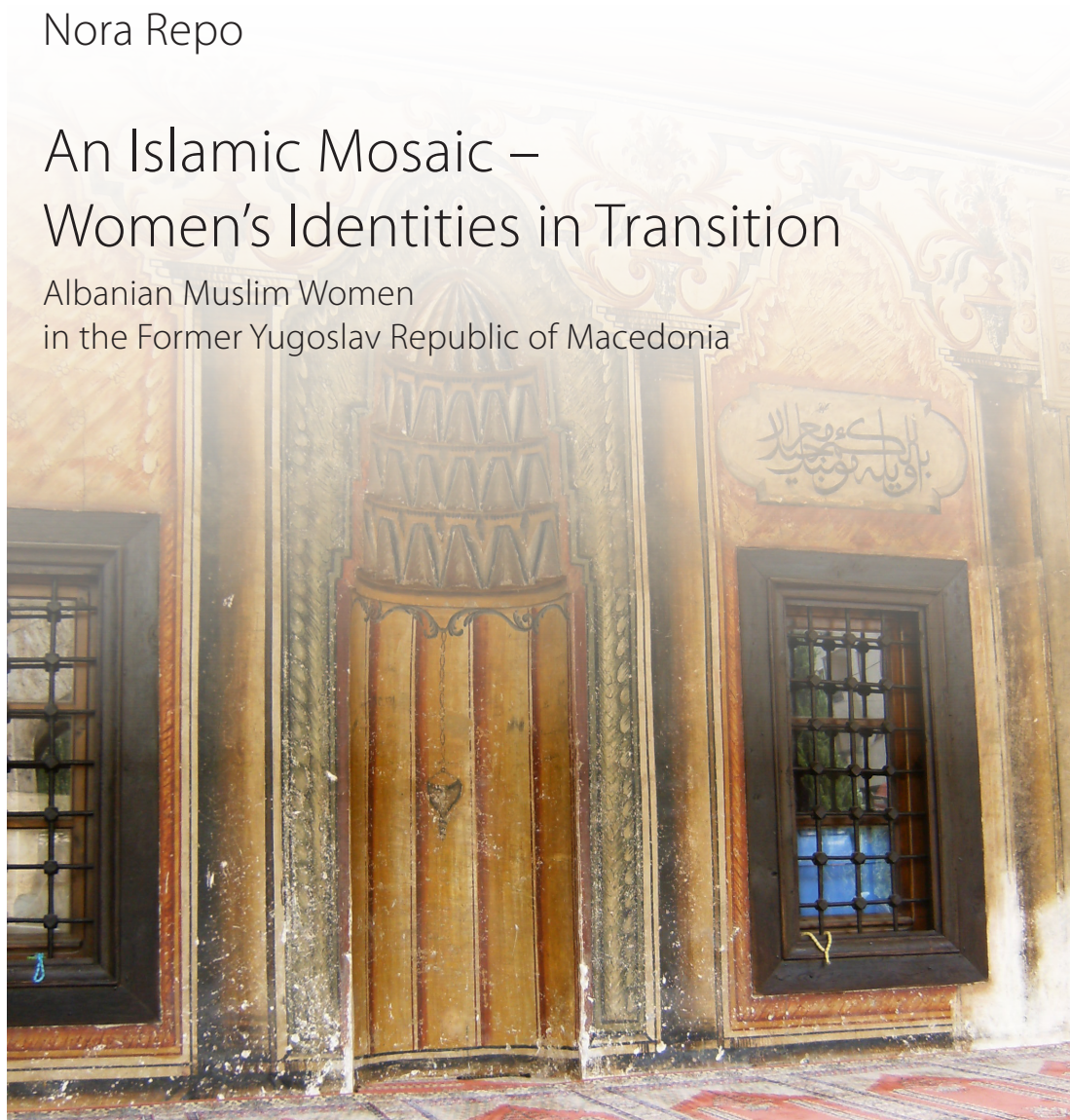


Nora Repo

# An Islamic Mosaic – Women’s Identities in Transition

Albanian Muslim Women  
in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia





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*The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.*

*C. G. Jung*

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While I now head towards new adventures, I would like to dedicate this work wholeheartedly to all my families.

# 1 Introduction

*It seems to me that the destiny of the so-called West is going to be worked out in the so-called East.*

*(Václav Havel)*

Always fascinated by the otherness, or what is understood as such, I have conducted this ethnographic, qualitative study in the field of comparative religion outside of my own cultural and religious spheres and exposed myself to both different and similar ways of life in south-eastern Europe – in the Balkans. The research context is placed within the borders of the mountainous and multicultural Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,<sup>1</sup> a small Balkan state, which is one of the successor states of the socialist Yugoslavia. The focus group of the study is the Muslim women of the Albanian minority. In the Republic of Macedonia Islam is the second largest religious tradition and the majority of Albanians are Muslims. Within the country's Islamic demographics most Muslims follow the Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of law, but Macedonian territory also embraces an old historical concentration of *tarikāt* (Sufi order) networks. Furthermore, new Islamic strands have entered the religious scene since the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia and the declaration of independence by the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 adding new pieces to the state's Islamic mosaic.

The aim of this study is to present characteristics of, and nuances in, the mosaic of women's everyday religiosities and to study the mosaic-like array of meanings of Islam as an element in the construction of identity among Albanian Muslim women in the present-day Republic of Macedonia. In terms of the understandings and conceptions that we in general create of 'others', negative connotations often colour our images. In the current global situation, adverse phenomena tend to shape our understanding and perceptions of Islam. How we perceive others is more frequently characterized by the ways in which they differ from us rather than how they are similar to us. This may strengthen negative connotations and lead to the creation of perceptions of possible threat, which often are groundless. In the case of the Balkans versus the rest of Europe, negative and orientaling perceptions have dominated the general impressions of what the Balkans are all about (see e.g. Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992; Jezernik 2004;

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth to be referred as the Republic of Macedonia. More details regarding the name of the country please see for example Frckoski 2009, Rasku 2007, Rasku 2011, Tamminen 2011a.

Todorova 1997). In the following chapters, I aim to show some aspects of the other side of the story and to bring a more nuanced perspective to the still widely prevailing perceptions.

In carrying out this study I spent time – altogether a five months period between 2008–2009 – in the Republic of Macedonia and interviewed Albanian Muslim women<sup>2</sup> about their everyday lives, religiosities<sup>3</sup> and Islam and also observed events and developments in Macedonian society. These, as well as the writing process that followed my stays in the field, are the working methods that I applied as part of an aim to produce an ethnographic account of the subject. Conducting a study on this particular topic has required also that I become acquainted with, for instance, Balkan history, historiography and geopolitics; with the Islamic history of the Balkans and the history of Albanians, and with Islamic theology and the religious practices of Muslim women, in addition to theoretical aspects related to the concept of identity. I have analyzed the interview material on three levels and used for this purpose a social psychological model of analysis that consists of a societal level, a level of interaction and an individual level. Hence, the study gathers together various themes, of which one in particular seems lately to be continuously under debate in the Western world: the Muslim woman. This is a topic that people often have an opinion about, but more rarely actual individual contacts with or concrete experiences of their ways of everyday living. The images people have are often coloured by those presented in the media and by the raising awareness of issues of identity among people, which is being brought about by the increasing number of contacts with a variety of manifestations of other cultural ways of living. Identity often tends to become more accentuated and emphasized in relation to questions of difference and it might also be given more importance in the context of more individual-centred ways of living.

When interactive relations between Europe and Islam are examined, two particular characteristics emerge: these contacts have been important and influential and simultaneously full of contradictions. From a

---

<sup>2</sup> I also interviewed three other people (interviews 10–12) regarding Islam in the Republic of Macedonia. In the text I refer to them as reference persons.

<sup>3</sup> Religion is never a single thing, either for individuals or for groups (Ammerman 2007a, 6). The definition I use for religiosity in this study is the one introduced by Tuija Hovi who sees it as the individual's internalized conviction – in other words, faith, but includes also the individual's behaviour as steered by this conviction, as well as communal commitment (Hovi 2007, 12).

European perspective Islam has been perceived to be a part of Europe's historical heritage, a source of cultural influences and an intellectual challenge. (Ouakrim 1998, 65) Just as the Balkans have often been perceived as 'Europe's Other'<sup>4</sup>, Islam as a religious tradition can similarly be seen as 'Other' in relation to a 'secular and/or Christian' Europe. However, nowadays European secularity and religious Islam can no longer be thought of as separate or indifferent to each other, as they are in various ways becoming closely interrelated and mutually transformed (Göle 2010, 246). The already historically multiconfessional context of the study, the Balkans, can be perceived as both: the East of the West and the West of the East (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, 1; Jezernik 2004, 23). Thus, in other words, as a region in between those imaginary poles which Havel in the quote above referred to; a middle of 'imagined nowheres'. In the 20th century, the ideological other, communism, replaced the geographical and cultural other, but the symbolic inferiority of the East has remained (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, 4). European symbolic geography intersects in Yugoslavia:

*All of these axes of European symbolic geography intersect in Yugoslavia, whose territory has seen the meeting place of empires (Eastern and Western Roman; Ottoman and Hapsburg), scripts (Cyrillic and Latin and, into the nineteenth century, Ottoman Turkish), religions (Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism, Islam, Judaism) and cold-war politics and ideologies (between the Warsaw Pact and NATO, communist-run but unorthodox, and non-aligned).*  
(Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, 4)

Thus, Islam and Muslim lives in the Republic of Macedonia form a challenging research field as parts of the many-sided mosaic of intersecting cultural, religious, linguistic and political factors.

It seems that in the 21st century, the politics of different ideologies that marked the 20th century have been replaced with the politics of identities, as the world is understood from more individual-centred perspectives and due to migratory movements and tighter and more global social networks, which continuously place identities in new po-

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Todorova 1997 or Jezernik 2004. Also ideas of 'what Europe has once been' or 'Europe that yet has to become Europe' have been advanced (Ristić 2007, 150). Iver B. Neumann however suggests that currently the desire to reduce this distance between the Balkans and Europe has meant that the European identity is formed more in relation to the United States and Turkey than in relation to Russia, Eastern Europe or the Balkans (Neumann 2007, 29).

sitions and also shape them. The emphasis given to a certain identity may even reach the point of being in some respects idolatry. Human communities tend to express their identities in mutually exclusive categories. These categories and binary expressions may serve the purpose of excluding and subordinating and therefore lead to the hardening of the identities they define. Also, identities that have experienced oppression can serve the same paradigm and use the oppressed identity marker to gain power. (Cf. Premawardhana 2008) These kinds of developments can be observed in the formation of identities in the Macedonian context, but they are present elsewhere too.

Most societies in the world are, like the Republic of Macedonia, characterized by ethnic diversity and the relationships between the groups are rarely entirely unproblematic. Some of the differences between the groups overlap, some have derived from other ones, while some may be more imagined than actual. Relationships between different ethnic groups also have their own political, social, economic and historical characteristics. (Cf. Liebkind 1984, 152) Even though language and religion are often considered as the most easily perceivable 'national markers', identity discourse in the Balkan context is also nourished by a significant amount of historical, geographical, juridical and ethnographic arguments as well as prejudices concerning one's neighbours and even certain Messianic perspectives (Lory 1996, 121). I agree with Ger Duijzings, who considers that in order to improve our understanding of the social dimensions within the Balkan framework, we should be more aware of other dividing lines than merely the ethnic ones. As Duijzings contends '[a]part from ethnic distinctions – which seem to set the tone in most Western analyses of Balkan society – it is crucial to give more attention to other principles of identification and affiliation which govern much of ordinary social life, such as kinship, gender, the urban-rural dichotomy and religion' (Duijzings 2000, 22; cf. Cowan and Brown 2000, 2), as all of these are important in establishing bonds of loyalty and assigning social roles. (Duijzings 2000, 22)

Hence, the concept of *identity* offers a more inclusive and wider frame within which to analyze the situation in the Republic of Macedonia than the often-used concept of *ethnicity*, which 'tends to overemphasize only one particular type of bond [...] as the paramount marker of group identity' and to push 'other relevant and sometimes even more important criteria of collective identification [...] to the background' (Duijzings 2000, 19). Different principles of affiliation and identification (such as ethnicity, gender, religion, class etc.) usually do correlate, converge and overlap, but not always entirely. 'Not all religious dif-

ferences are at the same time ethnic [...], nor are all ethnic boundaries underpinned by religious ones'. (Duijzings 2000, 21) However, in the Republic of Macedonia, and in the Balkans generally, ethnic and religious identifications are often intertwined (cf. Duijzings 2000, 21). Even though ethnic and national identities cannot be considered unimportant in the contemporary Balkans, it should not be overlooked that identities based on non-ethnic criteria, such as local, regional and religious identities, have remained very important, despite the fact that ethnic and national identities are admittedly being superimposed (Duijzings 2000, 19).

As an introduction to the study I will, in the following, elaborate on the study aims, on identity perspectives of being an Albanian and a Muslim, on previous research and on the researcher's positioning.

### **Study Aims and Structural Presentation**

The study aims are to describe characteristics of and nuances in Albanian women's Islamic religiosities and to study the meaning of Islam as an element in women's identity construction in the present-day Republic of Macedonia. I have conducted this analysis on three levels: the societal level, the level of interaction and the individual level. This choice has been made as these levels allow me to anatomize my material and reveal different aspects of this particular, many-layered research context. These analytical levels are used in social psychology – for example when ethnic identity is studied (cf. Liebkind 2010, 19). Although ethnic identity is not the focal point of this study, the three levels nevertheless provide an effective means of discerning the complex skein of identity formation in the Macedonian context, impregnated as it is by an interplay of different sets of entangled relationships: between individuals, groups, states and global political factors. Nonetheless, as Amina Wadud puts it with crystal clarity 'a theory is only as good as its practical implementation' (Wadud 2007 [2006], 16). Thus, its benefits become manifest in how I have applied it to my material.

How a person's identity is formed and exists in the continuous interaction with the social environment of which it is also a constituent part can be explained only through an understanding of the societal and cultural contexts. In order to achieve a satisfactory contextualization of the identity discussion I have chosen to speak as much as possible on the basis of empirical findings and to emphasize the narratives of



the women interviewed: what they shared of their experiences and in which way, as well as treat of my own observations in the field. The analytical model formed by the levels (see Chapter Two) assumes that the level of interaction mediates between the societal and individual level, that is to say, society and the individual influence one another indirectly. As Maykel Verkuyten observes:

*There is no society without actions of individuals and there is no individuality outside the society. It is in interactions that societal relations, beliefs, norms, and values are reproduced and changed, actualized, or challenged.*

*(Verkuyten 2006 [2005], 19)*

A sense of self and identity are also shaped by interactions (Verkuyten 2006, 19–20), and it is in the everyday interactions that both individuals and collectivities are structured and remade (Ammerman 2003, 215). The three levels are interdependent and analytically different and ‘cannot be reduced to one each other’ (Verkuyten 2006, 20).

Political, ideological, cultural, and economic features form the societal level (Verkuyten 2006, 19). At this level macrosocial and historical developments can be examined and it may include features such as the dominant discourses of the society in question and differences in power status (Liebkind 2010, 19; Verkuyten 2006, 19). In this study, at this level of analysis, I have located some of the questions related to the more public, political and social dimensions of Islam in women’s religiosity in the Republic of Macedonia. The rest of them are examined more closely at the level of interaction. I have striven to find answers to the following questions: How have the societal changes been reflected themselves in Macedonian Islam? Does the historical dimension still play a role today as regards the place given to Islam? How are nationalism, Albanian cultural traditions and liberation of Islamic religious life positioned *vis-à-vis* the Islamic religious praxis and religiosities of the Albanian women? What is the effect of societal circumstances on the religious praxis of women? How can women’s religiosities be perceived in the public sphere and what place is accorded to them? How do Albanian women feel about this themselves, do they wish things were different? Does Islam have an effect on women’s experiences as societal actors?

At the level of interaction the focus is on ‘the dynamics of both concrete and everyday contacts in many different situations’ and ‘[t]he emphasis is on the emergence and maintenance of identity in situated interactions’ (Verkuyten 2006, 19), within which the identity can be

'examined in terms of an ongoing process of social definitions and negotiations' (Liebkind 2010, 19). In the empirical material, there are descriptions of contacts and views that create differences on religious grounds between diverse societal and Islamic groups, but also for example between the genders and generations. I examine these differences and the role that Islam plays in light of the interactional perspective on situations and processes. In my analyses I strive to explain where Islam is situated in these contexts and whether it has a role (and if so, what kind) in the construction of identities. I also ask what is the women's response to Islamic plurality and what kind of effect does it have upon them? In what ways can Islam be experienced as both shared and divided? What is the importance given to the social dimension when religious conviction is enacted, for example in Islamic celebrations and rites of transition? In what ways is the Muslim way meaningful for women and what is their experience of it?

At the individual level of analysis, which involves the intraindividual (psychological) processes and personal characteristics (cf. Liebkind 2010 19; Verkuyten 2006, 18–19), the focus is more on private and personal ways of Islamic living. I map women's understandings of what it means to be a Muslim and identify the most crucial elements in the identity construction processes by asking how does religious conviction become visible in everyday life at the individual level? What are the corner stones of faith? In which ways do Islam and identity interplay? Many questions and themes that permeate the research task are often interpreted as being linked to the coexistence of the currents of modernization and tradition in Islamic religious life, and the place women occupy or are given between these poles of influence at a time of multifaceted societal transition. This study aims at demonstrating how this dichotomy of tradition and modernization as a backdrop to the transitional process enables the emergence of religious diversity, and a range of religiosities and identities.

All of the levels of this analysis interact with each other. The institutionalized practices, stereotypes and labels used for different groups (such as ethnic or language groups) at the societal level also play a role in 'how people define and position themselves, individually and in interactions' (Liebkind 2010, 19). However, this internalization is not determined; people may present themselves in one particular way and respond to social expectations in another, while they strive to establish and affirm their sense of identity in interactions. The social psychological perspective considers people on the one hand 'to be actively involved in defining and dealing with their identities', while

on the other they are 'perceived to interact and negotiate with each other to come to new or maintain present understandings of who and what they are or can be'. (Liebkind 2010, 19) A study which examines an identity can serve two central perspectives, firstly that of the *active, emergent and changing qualities of the identity*, as people usually 'describe themselves in flexible and context-sensitive ways' and secondly that of the more *enduring aspect of the identity*, because people, despite the changes in their identities, 'still have a relatively stable sense of self', which has elements that react to change relatively slowly (Liebkind 2010, 19). Thus, '[s]ome continuity clearly prevails at the same time that a complex society continually challenges that continuity' (Ammerman 2003, 211).

Structurally the study is divided into eight chapters. In the second chapter I sketch out the theoretical framework. I define the use of the term identity in this study, but also elaborate on aspects of identification processes as well as identity formation. Thereafter I will introduce the idea of identity as a crossroads of many elements. Furthermore I will briefly discuss the different kinds of identities that are relevant for the study. The reason for separating the theory (Chapter Two) and methods (Chapter Four) in the text is due to the logic that while the concept of identity also permeates the contextual overview (Chapter Three), and the methods and fieldwork can, according to my estimation, be more easily accessible to the reader once the specific conditions of the society being studied have been described. Thus, to present theory and methodology in this order might be more instructive to an understanding of the working conditions in the field and what kind of material I was able to gather in this context.

In the third chapter I describe the Macedonian context. The chapter aims to give a relevant picture of the development of national and religious identities, particularly Albanian and Muslim ones, in the various societal and political contexts that the Republic of Macedonia has historically been a part of. I have built this chapter up chronologically to outline an overview of the historical roots of the current circumstances within Macedonian society, as to ignore the history could distort fundamentally the understanding of the society and detach it from its chronological context (cf. Spickard 2002, 245). Also, understanding religion requires attention 'both to the "micro" world of everyday interactions and to the "macro" world of larger social structures' as Ammerman notes (Ammerman 2007b, 234). The final part of the chapter introduces and describes the Islamic presence in the Republic of Macedonia in present context.

In the fourth chapter I discuss the methods used in the study and anchor the work firstly methodologically to the hermeneutical tradition of the ethnography of religion. This chapter includes a description of the methods used in the fieldwork, the circumstances in the field and the nature of the gathered material, and also introduces each of the women interviewed. In the last part of the chapter, I reflect on the interactive process of interpreting qualitative material that takes place between the researcher and the material.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven contain analyzes organized according to the above-mentioned analytical levels respectively, and in them are discussed the different themes that emerge from the empirical material. In Chapter Five, at the societal level of analysis, my aim has been to map societal and social issues related to Islam, women's religiosities and identity construction. In Chapter Six, at the level of interaction, I examine the emergence and maintenance of identity, and Islam as an element in the interactional situations such as Islamic celebrations and rites of transition. In Chapter Seven, at the individual level, I focus more on the private sphere of Albanian women's religious experiences. This chapter aims to introduce more individual and personal ways of understanding and interpreting the contemporary Islamic religiosity and the identities of the Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia. In the eighth chapter, I sum up my conclusions and the findings of the study – what can be said about the Albanian Muslim women's identities, based on my material and what is the possible role of Islam in the construction of their identities. Finally, I bring out some reflections on the methodological choices and on possibilities for further studies.

## **Being an Albanian and a Muslim – from a Woman's Perspective**

In this section I introduce and discuss the core concepts, which are linked to the study. I briefly elaborate some reflections on gender, on the Islamic/Muslim woman and on developments related to the formation of an Albanian identity, as well as on identity as an analytical category.

The difference between the genders is one of the key perceptions that commonly colour our interpretations of the world (Nissinen 1999, 20). There are no cultures that would not distinguish between men and women, in terms of the way they are expected to behave and how

they are supposed to be (Verkuyten 2006, 44). Many essential communitarian structures and ways of self-interpretation are constructed on the basis of this distinction, which is not only defined as a biological fact, but also to large extent as a cultural symbol (Nissinen 1999, 20; Verkuyten 2006, 44). When I discuss women's identities in this study, I refer to a socially constructed conception of identity that is contextually and culturally related. Thus, I perceive gender as a continuously negotiable category with changing boundaries. (Cf. Pesonen 2003, 181)

The Islamic world has a strong tradition of women's cultural expression, but knowledge of this field, unfortunately, often has an incomplete quality. In different Muslim communities women's culture is very diverse and many-faceted, and the role and status of the women in every society is always the sum of many different factors. There is an important connection between the economic and the socio-political situation within a state *vis-à-vis* the responsibility, freedom, various tasks and societal status that women have. When her life situation and the opportunities she has to make significant life choices are evaluated, determining factors may also be the family network that the woman belongs to as well as her age, personal economic situation and level of education. Therefore the status of women within the Islamic world cannot be considered as standardized, but it is as much subject to change as people's lives in general tend to be. (Ouakrim 1998, 73)

Islam is a multifaceted religion. Even though the five pillars of Islam are often considered as uniting over one and half billion people, Muslims hold a wide range of views and practices with respect to many issues, and these can depend, for instance, on the culture, educational background, gender and age of the individual. Some of these views and practices are drawn from basic Islamic sources, some can be a matter of interpretation and some are traditional customs. (Hallenberg 2008, 74 and 76) 'What Islam says about something' can therefore be many things and not everything in a cultural context can be explained in Islamic terms (cf. Dahlgren 1999). In many countries the individual's, and particularly women's and children's, opportunities are not limited by Islam, but by societal inequality, poverty, lack of education, the fact of being in a state of war or as the result of the displacement of people (Hallenberg 2008, 78).

Thus, Islam does not appear to any greater extent than the other religious traditions in the world to be as a monolithic ethical and moral system at the individual level. The everyday life and festivities of Muslim women can take as many different forms as they may within

any other religious tradition (Ouakrim 1998, 7) and Islam at a normative level often differs from the actual everyday religious practice in a given context (Hallenberg 2008, 78). Culture and religion can both be understood as spectra of diversity through which the individual strives internally towards him or herself and externally towards the surrounding world and unity with others. How these strivings manifest cannot be defined exhaustively. This is why it can be stated that both cultural and religious belonging have dynamic characteristics. (Nynäs 2005, 122) Cultural belonging can occasionally be characterized more clearly by religious nuances. To define what *belongs to* and *is* religion, ethnicity or culture can be very difficult in practice (Nynäs 2005, 121; cf. Ammerman 2007b, 221), as the religious and profane dimensions of people's everyday lives 'are not merely linked, but interpenetrate' (McGuire 2002a, 114). The sacred is 'embedded in human social practices such as calendric rituals, use of space, and meaning laden postures and gestures' (McGuire 2002a, 114).

Islam is not monolithic, nor is the space given or taken by women within it. Nor are the practical forms through which Islam is expressed. (Dahlgren 1999, 89) Rather, Islam 'has a plethora of meanings and experiences' (Wadud 2007, 5). Social hierarchies, ethnic and cultural differences, rural and urban differences and regional traditions together have an impact on how Islam is understood. Thus, inside one and the same country completely different praxes may prevail, which can all be called Islamic. (Dahlgren 1999, 89–90) Islamic interpretations therefore always depend on the time and the place in which they are done, as well as on the interpreter. One can receive different answers to, or interpretations of, the same question from different persons and through different sources. Between different options everyone can make their own choices, as Islam also leaves room for personal interpretations. (Hallenberg 2008, 78) Furthermore, because Islam has been divided into many schools, there are diverse prevailing perceptions that can all be justified by means of reference to Islam. Therefore, for example, concerning the status of women in society and in the family we can encounter completely opposing opinions. (Dahlgren 1999, 90) Amina Wadud considers that the Muslims have lately been struggling through an identity crisis, which has been caused by a variety of reasons such as the infiltration of colonialism and the corruption of Muslim complacency in response to globalization and pluralism, Western secular human rights universals, and even 'sheer backwardness' of the Muslims, as Wadud puts it. She argues that this struggle has also involved the questions related to the identity of Muslim women. (Wadud 2007, 187)

The concept of the *Islamic woman* tends to disengage the Muslim women from their own historical and social contexts and to create an ideal image that Susanne Dahlgren considers to be a part of the ideal Islamic *Umma* has, and which does not recognize, for example, state borders. Western perspectives often confuse the ideal and the actual; many women strive for the ideal, but not all of them have the opportunity to live according to it. Some women may also choose not to practise religion or to emphasize just some of its elements, which they consider to be central. (Cf. Dahlgren 1999, 90–91; Duijzings 2000, 25) Femaleness and maleness are culturally constructed and through the socialization process these definitions become a part of the individual women's self-definitions. (McGuire 2002a, 128) This can be reflected in the shared language and imagery of the group and it may exert an influence on group members' patterns of thought. Furthermore, particularly religious symbols and images mould the individual's gender role concept. (McGuire 2002a, 128–129) Thus, gender is a relevant category when the religiosity is examined. Women often tend to be more religious than men in terms of their interest in religion, commitment, practice and attendance. This can manifest throughout the course of life and regardless of the belief system or formal object of their affiliation. (Kuusisto 2011, 26)

Even though individuals are a part of a larger religious community, this does not imply that their religious practice or conviction would automatically become an identical copy of the group's official stance on religion (McGuire 2002a, 129; cf. Ammerman 2007b, 219–220). Meredith McGuire emphasizes that a woman's religious experience, and what she tends to stress within it, are often qualitatively different from the man's, even within the same religious tradition. Furthermore, she contends: 'Women's status in most religious groups is circumscribed by gender stratification' (McGuire 2002a, 129–130). The legitimation for this and the role that religion has played in it can be found in the historical continuum. Religions are influenced by their collective memories and traditions, '[b]ut there is no direct or deterministic connection between tradition and shared present memory. That is why the same tradition can spawn so many diverse religious groups, each with different ways of living out of their common tradition' (McGuire 2002a, 130).

The majority of Albanians in the present day Balkans live on the territories of four states: Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia. In addition, Greece and Serbia have

sizeable Albanian minorities (see for example Barjaba and King 2005).<sup>5</sup> Despite persistent assumptions, the political feeling of solidarity among Albanians is not monolithic across all borders and the question of their national unity and the ramifications connected to it remain multidimensional (Andonovski 1998, 71–72). Albanians are a part of the diversified demographic tissue that extends all over the Balkan Peninsula. Like many other national groups living in the area, Albanians share a heterogeneous religious affiliation; they are predominantly Muslim, Orthodox Christian or Roman Catholic, but some may belong to other religious groups too (cf. Duijzings 2002, 60). Albanians form the majority of Balkan Muslims:<sup>6</sup> their number is estimated to be between 4 and 4.5 millions, (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 18) and they also represent the majority of the non-homogeneous Muslim population in the Republic of Macedonia (Clayer 2001, 178).<sup>7</sup> There is a small number of Christian Albanians too (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 18): some Roman Catholics are living in the capital Skopje and a few Orthodox villages are located around Lake Ohrid in the south (Poulton 2000, 82).

Duijzings suggests that religious differences were an obstacle to national unity among the Albanians at the end of the 19th century and therefore more significance has been attached to language<sup>8</sup> than religion in identity formation, as the former became ‘the main vehicle for national unity’ and could function as a bridge between regional and religious identities (Duijzings 2002, 60–61). Gilles de Rapper however notes that even though national unity as a means of suppressing the religious differentiation is often at the core of the most widely spread Albanian national rhetoric, it is nevertheless ‘challenged when local society is underpinned by, and conceptualized in terms of, religious differentiation’ (de Rapper 2002, 191). Local cultures have an impact

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<sup>5</sup> For the Albanian minority in Greece see for example Barjaba and King 2005, 12–13; Poulton 1991, 189. The coastal region of Chameria, divided between Greece and Albania, and the disputes related to it have resulted in tensions between the two countries. Greece and Italy are key destinations for the Albanian migration, followed by other countries such as Canada, UK, the USA (Barjaba and King 2005, 19).

<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the 1990s the number of all Muslims in the Balkans was estimated to be slightly over 8 million (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 15, for more details see Bougarel and Clayer 2001b).

<sup>7</sup> Bosnians and Macedonian Muslims also belong to the Muslim community (the last mentioned are often known as Torbeši) as well as Turks and Roma (some of the latter have also declared themselves to be Egyptians, for more details see e.g. Duijzings 2000), (Clayer 2001, 179).

<sup>8</sup> Albanian has several dialects among which the most important division is between the northern Geg and southern Tosk dialects. The latter functions as the basis of literary language.



on customs regardless of the wider cultural or religious frame of reference that one might belong to. People might also seek support for the continuance of local customs from Islamic sources, or justify a particular custom as being Islamic, even though it might not be. (Cf. Hallenberg 2008, 78) That is to say that even though Albanian national identity, or at least the rhetoric linked to it, often seems to be more concentrated on language, its unity is challenged by religious and local identities. Qadr, one of the Albanian women I interviewed for the study, described how she viewed the relationship between her Albanian cultural background and her religious conviction and reflected upon the extent to which they might offer each other mutual support:

*Qadr: Well, [they do] not [support each other] very much, they don't you know, because the cultural one is something different and the religion is totally something [else], [they] really have totally different requirement[s].*

*NR [Nora Repo]: Hmh [nodding].*

*Qadr: Mm the culture is, the Albanian culture is, I don't know how much you are informed, it's very large because, you know the Albanian parts we have like Muslims and Christians [...] we have Orthodox, we have aa mm Bektashi, so basically the Albanians are the only people that I think that have, they have all this [...] possible religion, so all of them have different religion and aa the culture, we have one culture.*

*(Qadr, 27 years old, living in a village)*

One of the other women interviewed, Farah, saw this issue somewhat differently. For her, cultural background was rooted in the past and in the environment people lived in, and therefore this background underwent a continuous change. Islam, on the other hand, in Farah's view covered all of these aspects (Farah). While Qadr considered religious and cultural dimensions among the Albanians to be more often not overlapping, Farah perceived Albanian culture as being subsumed under Islamic religious tradition. Thus, for Qadr, unity could be found in a common culture when Farah thought it was offered by religion.

The gradual end of Ottoman era at the beginning of the 20th century, crystallized ideas of national identities in the Balkans and turned the empire's population, which was like a 'big moving mosaic' into smaller groupings, which were each much more aware of their national cohesiveness (cf. Clayer 2007, 22). The Ottoman society was a complex structure, simultaneously multiethnic, multilingual and multiconfessional, within which there was a fluidity of mechanisms of identification (Clayer 2007, 21). The dynamically transforming structure of the empire's population could be explained through diverse develop-

ments such as population migrations, other demographic variations, conversions, and the changing loyalties of different ethnic groups<sup>9</sup>, which were facilitated by common multilingualism, religious communities or socio-professional identification. (Clayer 2007, 22) From the mixed character of the Ottoman society emerged, particularly from the 1870s onwards, more and more distinctly defined national groupings. The region of the present Republic of Macedonia found itself to be at the centre of attention of many different contrahent parties and the violent events which occurred in the Balkans at the turn of the 20th century were very much involved with the struggle over Macedonian territory. Religious identity has been a significant factor in the formation of Balkan identities at least since the Ottoman period, as a primary political importance was then attached to religious divisions through the *millet* system. (Cf. Duijzings 2002, 60; Karakasidou 1997, 108; Poulton 1991, 209)

The richness of the Islamic religious tradition offers believers opportunities to interpret it in various ways. This also becomes visible on the religious terrain of the Republic of Macedonia. Within the Albanian community, the place and role of religion is being re-defined and negotiated. In these processes Nathalie Clayer (2001) distinguishes three types of ideological orientation. Firstly there is the orientation for *the rejection of Islam*, which could also be named *occidentalization*, which aims at raising the profile of the Christian background of the Albanian population, and its therefore European character. Secondly a *pluriconfessional orientation*, which seeks to direct attention to the multi-confessional and tolerant nature of the Albanian population, while considering religious identity as secondary to national identity. This orientation tends to promote the European core of the nation too. Thus, an emphasis on national identity is considered to be a more European trait than an emphasis on a religious one. The third orientation is *the Islamo-nationalist orientation*, which understands the choice of Islam or the Islamization of Albanian population in the Ottoman (or, it is claimed, even pre-Ottoman) period to be a conscious intention to protect Albanian national identity against external influences (for example Slavic or Greek) as well as an intellectual move, because

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<sup>9</sup> For example the phenomena of the Albanization, Greekization, Slavization or Turkification of the populations that could have been politically forced, but sometimes took place on voluntary basis. Depending on the societal and social context people might transform their sense of group identity to a more suitable one or to experience a certain group identity as being more apt than another. (Cf. for example Poulton 1991, 209)

Islamic culture at that period denoted progress. This latter orientation is particularly opposed to that of occidentalization. (Clayer 2001, 228–232)

Furthermore Clayer suggests that the Muslim Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia could be roughly divided into three groups. Firstly, the often elderly populations in the villages, who have a strong religious identity expressed through a traditional Islamic way of living that has links with *Kanun* legislation. Secondly there are the partially urbanized first generations of the communist period which have internalized Islam as a natural element of their cultural heritage, even though it has often remained less commonly practised. Thirdly there are the very urbanized younger generations who are influenced by the nationalist ideology with atheist tendencies. The religious consciousness and practice of the third group remain weaker and national identity gains more focus. (Clayer 2001, 208) All of these expressions of religious identity, or their repercussions, can be perceived in contemporary circumstances as Islamic religious life dynamically articulates with other societal and social elements and individual perspectives in the Republic of Macedonia, and they are manifest in my material, as we will discover later on. It seems to me that among the somewhat new manifestations of religious identities, there are Muslims who have liberal, more individual<sup>10</sup> or reformist views of Islam. In my interview quota they represented the majority. These Muslim women often expressed contentment with and were proud of their religious background and its links with nationalist discourse seemed to be very few. Many of these women frequently tended to give their time and interest in order to gain a better knowledge of Islam and to find ways of joining the religious and Islamic with contemporary life, or to take individual decisions in terms of what they considered to be relevant for their religiosities. In this study I would like to expand the categorizations introduced by Clayer and render more diversified and nuanced the image of Islam in relation to the Albanian women's identities in the Republic of Macedonia. I aim to map from a qualitative angle and in more detail the diversity of women's religiosities and the manifestations of women's identities, and the Islamic mosaic they form, in order to illuminate the many-sided characteristics of this horizon and to possibly complete Clayer's thoughts.

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<sup>10</sup> Some of these views might even be interpreted as secularized.

At present many changes are taking place within Macedonian society. These often strive to demonstrate and to improve the 'European' character of the country. The change from a socialist administration to parliamentary democracy, which has taken place from 1991 onwards, has meant that the current of transition has penetrated, and continues to impact, all layers of the society. Even if there are, admittedly, continual changes in every society, it seems that in the Macedonian case these changes may sometimes be comparatively accentuated in nature. For Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia, they have meant the arrival of new cultural features and trends, sometimes introducing completely new elements, fortifying old ones, reshaping traditional ways and rendering possible a concurrent existence of more diversified cultural lifestyles. In societies that undergo important social changes, each individual must re-define him or herself within a context where daily routines and decisions are being constantly questioned and politicized (Thiessen 2007, 12). Social change makes possible new ways of speaking about society and the experiences that the individuals have within it. This situation of profound change 'offers new means of creating and interpreting the social order' as well as 'new ways of ordering and talking about life itself' (Thiessen 2007, 17). Thus, the societal status that Albanian women have is not static: it is influenced by social changes and simultaneously it affects the processes of social transformation. To observe social changes through a gendered perspective can also illuminate and help us evaluate these processes of change. (Cf. Thiessen 2007, 17)

The theoretical key concept of the study – identity (see Chapter Two) – consists both of change and permanence. Identity exists in relation to its environment and reflects changes within it. It has diverse dimensions, for example ethnic, national, professional, religious and sexual ones, which do not necessarily achieve mutual harmony. Human beings can interpret themselves in different ways in different contexts, which is why the diverse aspects of identity in one and the same person do not necessarily form a harmonious and coherently articulated ensemble. (Nissinen 1999, 26) Identity is a sum of smaller components and '[i]t has as much to do with how one views oneself, i.e. one's *self-definition*, as it has to do with how one is perceived by others' (Roald 2001, 17). A person's self-definition may also differ or be at odds with other people's perceptions or it can transform and adapt to the circumstances. (Roald 2001, 17)

Hence, the structures both within and outside the Albanian community play a role in deciding where Islam is situated in women's

identities, how much space is accorded to it and what is understood as belonging to it. These structures have an impact on how Islam is comprehended, interpreted and lived in everyday life. Sometimes the context that Islam is a part of can be very widespread, even global, or then it may be the converse; strongly rooted in the local or individual interpretations. This mosaic, or hybridity, may challenge and diminish authority within a religious tradition, but it does not necessarily imply that the general presence and impact of religious and spiritual factors in people's lives or in society would somehow be reduced (Ammerman 2007a, 8). In the dynamically changing context of societal transition religion can acquire many, and even more accentuated, meanings; some of them old, some transformed and some completely new.

## **Previous Research on Islam, Women and the Republic of Macedonia**

As the theme of this study brings together and intersects many fields of research, I have sought in this section to focus on the key aspects that contextualize it in relation to the wider research tradition. Firstly, I discuss research conducted in the West on Islam and Muslims, religion and women in both the general European and more specifically Finnish contexts. These perspectives have been chosen, because as a researcher I can be placed within all of these categories: I am a Westerner, a European and a Finn. Thereafter, I briefly examine the Islamic research tradition of studies on Muslim women. This is motivated by the study aims, which is to broaden the current scope of knowledge regarding the religiosity and other religiously related aspects in the lives of Muslim women and the meanings given to them in the women's identity formations. I then describe the ethnography of religion as a research tradition to which this study is attached. I also discuss the contributions of some key scholars, specialists in Balkan – and some of them more precisely in Macedonian – studies and issues. To conclude, I reflect on the ways in which this study may contribute to the current research in the field.

The change in the prevailing attitudes in Western Europe towards Muslim populations, which has come to the fore over the past two decades, can be thought of as *religionization*. This expresses the idea that people with Muslim backgrounds living in different countries are more often perceived in terms of their religious background than, for example, in terms of their social status, education or way of living. This positioning has been supported by developments towards more

organized religious ways of life among Muslims living in Europe and by the spread of images of a global Islam in the media. Muslims have also participated in strengthening the image of Islam's unity and the idea of the priority of Muslim identity. (Martikainen, Sakaranaho and Juntunen 2008, 8–9) Academic research on Muslims and Islamists still, regardless of its actual quality, may embrace tendencies that consider these groups as homogeneous (Roald 2001, 8–9).<sup>11</sup> However, a variety of ways of interpreting Islam clearly demonstrates how difficult it is to draw the line between religion, culture and politics and to delineate where one ends and the other begins (cf. Sakaranaho 2008, 22). Even though efforts have been made to pay more attention to differences between Muslims with different national attachments, much less value has been placed on the class differences and cultural backgrounds existing within national groups. There has also been a lack of awareness of the diversity of relationships to Islam that Muslim women have. Anne Sofie Roald observes that the willingness of a Muslim woman to define herself primarily as a Muslim does not always have to do with the religious dimension in her life. (Roald 2001, 8–9)<sup>11</sup>

As to the research done on Muslims until recent times, it has been claimed that the heritage of *Orientalism*, which was identified by Edward Said (1979) as a discourse that divides the world hierarchically into two: the known (Europe, West, we) and the unknown (Orient, East, them), continues to play a role in Western research on Islam. Thus, there is a tendency to remove Muslims from their cultural context – when, for example, social or historical factors within Muslim communities are explained by religion. (Tiilikainen 2003, 16) Also, some generalizing basic assumptions seem to be at play when it comes to defining aspects such as the status of Muslim women and the place that Islam has in their lives. In particular the Islamic headscarf has been considered to be a symbol of women's submission within the Islamic communities. Islam is also thought of as the reason for social under-development and as an obstacle to equality between men and women. In research, women living in Muslim countries are often referred to by collective terms that can underline their assumed otherness, as if these women would be representatives of a monolithic

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<sup>11</sup> Roald refers here particularly to Muslim women living away from their native countries and possibly experiencing some level of alienation in their new environment. This feeling of marginalization vis-à-vis the majority culture might lead women to define themselves as primarily Muslim although in some other context they would possibly use different self-definitions. From this angle Islam can be understood as a concept that refers to a 'traditional structure, history and society' (Roald 2001, 9).

group. Also, Muslim women have been presented as persons with no historical background and no active role in their own society. (Tiilikainen 2003, 16–17)

In the European context, despite a general and growing interest in the Islamic world and its heritage, Muslim women's religious expertise and their experiences in the framework of religious life remain among the areas where there are still plenty of issues to be uncovered for scientific research (Sakaranaho 2006, 217). The number of studies concerning women in the Muslim world has, however, been steadily growing since the 1970s within different scientific fields (Raudvere 2002, 24; Tiilikainen 2003, 21). In Western countries, the research on Muslims has been particularly conducted in states where the Muslim presence is relatively important. Despite the increasing interest that has manifested itself in recent decades within different disciplines, such as the social sciences and cultural studies (Sakaranaho 2008, 11), scientific knowledge concerning Muslims in the eastern and southern parts of Europe remains less significant in quantity (cf. Tiilikainen 2003, 21). Catharina Raudvere notes too that studies have rarely focused on women's religious practices, as they have had the tendency 'to address other social matters and macro structures behind everyday life' (Raudvere 2002, 24). She points out that there is a perceptible lack of knowledge 'not only about Islam, but about Islam as a lived local practice in general' (Raudvere 2002, 24). Muslim women's ritual lives have, however, become more emphasized in recent studies, and this has diminished the stereotypical and monolithic picture of 'Muslim women' as a group (Raudvere 2002, 25). Recent research also shows that the Muslim women in Europe are achieving expertise in Islam themselves. How this expertise will be received in the remarkably male-dominated religious scene of the European Umma remains until now somewhat 'unveiled'. (Cf. Sakaranaho 2006, 196)

In Finland, the emergence of research on religion that includes a gender perspective is relatively recent, and it is only from the 1980s onwards that this topic has received more attention (Mahlamäki 2006, 111). Questions related to gender have become more visible in recent Finnish studies on religion that have dealt with geographically more scattered material and Muslims, for instance in Turkey (Sakaranaho 1998), Morocco (Juntunen 2002), Somalia (Tiilikainen 2003)<sup>12</sup> and Yemen (Dahlgren 2004). (Mahlamäki 2006, 111–113; Sakaranaho 2008,

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<sup>12</sup> The Muslim women in the focus of this study lived in Finland.

22–23) When it comes to the Islamic research tradition, Roald notes that

*studies on women in Islam have been many and of varying quality. Islamic scholars have written on different subjects within the field of gender issues. These scholars have, however, first and foremost been concerned with the area of female covering and social segregation of the sexes.*  
(Roald 2001, xiii)

Since the 1980s, Muslim women have also become more proactive on issues related to gender and have thereby introduced women's perspectives to the study of Islam (Roald 2001, xiv). As non-Muslims often tend to consider Islam as a religion which is hostile towards women, Muslims for their part can argue that there never was a gender issue in Islam before 'the West' interfered in Muslim matters. This latter view suggests that the 'ideal gender pattern already exists in Islam and is present in Muslim society' (Roald 2001, viii; cf. Mir-Hosseini 2003, 14). Roald argues that what is considered to be Islamic from both of these perspectives 'very often turns out to be the Islamic sources interpreted through cultural experiences' while the question of what is a cultural and what an Islamic practice remains a subject of ongoing discussion (Roald 2001, viii).<sup>13</sup>

Questions related to the gender issues within Islamic theology as well as women's perspectives on these matters, have attracted interest over the years. Saba Mahmood notes that once one started to concentrate more on locating women's agency, 'it played a crucial role in complicating and expanding debates about gender in non-Western societies beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy' (Mahmood 2005, 6). This focus rendered possible a crucial corrective to a strand of scholarship, particularly on the Middle East, which had perceived 'Arab and Muslim women as passive and submissive beings shackled by structures of male authority' (Mahmood 2005, 6). Mahmood also writes that:

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<sup>13</sup> Some researchers would, for instance according to a contextual definition of religion claim that what Muslims believe is Islamic is part of Islam, whereas many Muslims would define Islam as that which is written in the sources. With regard to the standpoint of these researchers, they regard "Islam" as a discourse and have difficulties in distinguishing between "high" and "low" Islam. On the other hand, Muslims who claim that Islam is what is written in the sources fail to observe the close link between religious manifestations and their surroundings.' (Roald 2001, viii)



*The ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women's agency cannot be emphasized enough, especially when one remembers that Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression.*  
(Mahmood 2005, 7)

Wadud states that for the empowerment of Muslim women, it is crucial that women apply their experiences to the interpretation of the Islamic sources, particularly the Qur'an, so that more female-inclusive interpretations, development, and reform in Muslim politics can be attained. This development may offer the means for a better self-understanding of Islamic sources on the part of women, and, thus, fortify women's identities in Islam and the Islamic authenticity of women's claims to reform (Wadud 2007, 8).

Since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia the indigenous and long-established Muslim communities in the Balkan area have started to play a more visible role in Western Europe, mainly because of the refugees who have come from this area (cf. Sakaranaho 2006, 195–196 and 201; Sakaranaho 2004, 214–215). This has led to a certain kind of 're-discovery' of these Muslim populations. It seems that because the Balkans over the past 20 years have been exposed to many important societal changes and diverse unfortunate conflicts, the area has been receiving more attention among academic scholars, often from the field of political sciences, but also among historians, linguists, geographers and scholars interested in minority questions and nationalism.<sup>14</sup> These studies to some extent clarify the religious dimensions of the different Balkan states, but the main focus in them is for the most part placed elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Ilká Thiessen points out that in the research concentrating on Eastern Europe women's lives in general have been gathering scant interest. Eastern European anthropology and ethnographies have often been historically oriented, or have dealt with specific cultural traditions. (Thiessen 2010, 41) The Islamic presence in the Republic of Macedonia has until now been a topic which

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<sup>14</sup> Concerning studies related to the Republic of Macedonia or 'the Albanian question' the following names in particular can be mentioned Brunnbauer (e.g. 2002), Chiclet and Lory (e.g. 1998), Friedman (e.g. 1997 and 1996), Iseni (e.g. 2008), Pettifer and Vickers (e.g. 2007), Poulton (e.g. 2000), Qosja (e.g. 1995), Ragaru (e.g. 2008), Roux (e.g. 1992), Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer (e.g. 2002), Tamminen (e.g. 2011a and 2011b).

<sup>15</sup> There are however local, often Islamic, scholars such as Ali Pajaziti (2003), Naser Ramadani (2008) and Fahrudin Ebibi (2008), who have concentrated in their work on the questions concerning Islam in the Republic of Macedonia.

has been studied to a relatively limited extent. However in recent decades there have been more scholars conducting studies on Islam in the Balkans (e.g. Bougarel 2005; Bringa 1995; Clayer 1990 and 2001; Duijzings 2000; Popovic 1996 and 1986a), and on the construction of national identity, but also to some extent religious identity, among different Balkan populations, which has touched also on the Republic of Macedonia and/or its Albanian population (e.g. Andonovski 1998; Clayer 2007 and 2001; Lory 1998; Thiessen 2007). The Balkans are a patchwork formation on the level of religion and religiosities. This becomes manifest in the variety of ways in which religion is lived and experienced in the different Balkan states. The fact that Albanian and Balkan Muslim religiosities and identities overlap and intertwine, but are not commensurate, renders the pursuit of a research approach similar to that of this thesis a relatively complex task.

This study brings together and reflects on several different fields of research. The nature of comparative religion as a discipline, which often 'borrows' methods and theories from others, means that the studies conducted in its field are characterized by inter-disciplinarity or multi-disciplinarity. My decision to examine religiosity from the women's perspective juxtaposes the gender perspective with the chosen religious thematic. The theme of this study admittedly unifies some of the ideas of feminist research, bringing together the idea of perceiving women as active social actors and that of the *religious paradigm* that refers to the idea of perceiving the whole culture studied through the lens of an institutionalized religion. Researchers have often been tempted to see religion, particularly Islam, as the image of prevailing culture and the reasons for the subordinate status of women have been found in theology or in other religious ways of functioning. (Pesonen 2003, 188; Sakaranaho 1998, 14 and 224–225) My methodological choice of the ethnography of religion can also be understood as part of an aim to achieve greater gender inclusivity, as women's experiences are often neglected in documentary and textual sources (Ingersoll 2002, 162). Even though this gender perspective is somehow involved in my topic, I do not consider my study to be a contribution to gender studies, as its focus is primarily on religion. I consciously chose not to apply a Western feminist approach and have rather adopted a perspective from within. However, I have allowed views of a feminist tendency to surface to a certain extent, for instance through the diversity and polyphony which can be observed in the women's answers. Within the limits of my material, it is my wish to shed light on women's religiosities that have often received less attention in scientific literature and my approach is that of the scholar of

religion, which is to say that it is 'an attempt to research and discuss the phenomena of religions as they are presented by religious texts, people, places and occasions' (Harvey 2004, 168).

The empirical material of this study has been gathered by means of ethnographic methods and it anchors the study into the rich Finnish ethnographic research tradition in comparative religion. Among the Finnish pioneers (Hilma Granqvist, Georg August Wallin, Edvard Westermarck) in the research of the Arabic language and Islam, I follow the path indicated by Westermarck and Granqvist in whose research the striving to contextualize Muslims both culturally and socially can be discerned (Sakaranaho 2008, 21). Granqvist also brought Muslim women to life as social actors in her works<sup>16</sup>(Raudvere 2002, 25). I approach Islam as a system of beliefs which is linked in many ways to people's everyday lives in very different cultural, social and political contexts. As a result the object of the research is not so much the 'essence' of Islam, but rather Muslims who practise their religion in different ways and who live in a variety of local, but also in a constantly enlarging sense, global contexts. This type of research can make use of a diversified methodology, which I have striven to apply in my choice of methods, which take the form of thematically structured in-depth interviews and participant observation. As the field of Balkan studies seems to be clearly emphasized by descriptive (e.g. historical and anthropological)<sup>17</sup> research and research that examines the issues from a wider political, societal or social perspective, my attempt is to map more individual experiences from a qualitative angle. Through this analysis I want to demonstrate where Islam is situated in the identity construction processes of the Albanian women interviewed and why and what kinds of meanings it might carry for the women.

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<sup>16</sup> Through themes such as Arabic family life, birth, childhood, marriage and death, see for example Granqvist (1939).

<sup>17</sup> Will Myer has produced an interesting and detailed travelogue entitled *People of the Storm God. Travels in Macedonia* (2005), which also includes information about religion and religiosity in the Republic of Macedonia. Munevera Hadžišehović's biography *A Muslim Woman in Tito's Yugoslavia* (2003) describes in great detail the life of a Muslim woman in Sandžak during the socialist period.

## My Western Eyes

In this section I discuss the researcher's positioning, the issues related to research ethics and elaborate on some concepts, names, terms and toponyms used in the study.

To describe a culture, and religion as a part of it, is a precondition for the creation of an understanding of it and a step towards an opportunity to explain it (Opas 2004, 157). In ethnography, in which people are in the focus of the research, the attempt to understand is more emphasized however than the attempts to explain (Spickard 2002, 243). Describing a culture ethnographically includes an interpretative process: to describe means to interpret, as the subject is examined through the subjective involvement of researcher's own self (Opas 2004, 157; cf. Landers 2002; McGuire 2002b, 197). Culture is not an entity that would possess clearly defined borders; culture is in a state of constant movement, process and activity that creates systems of order and categorizes and defines values. Culture consists of interdependent elements, such as politics, religion, law and economy. How these elements are interconnected in my study depends on the way I as an ethnographer comprise these relationships in the light of my research task. The borders of cultures are not naturally fixed, but continually subject to redefinition, and they change when the perspective from which they are observed or the classification system related to them changes. To describe a culture includes the researcher's views and partial points of view. Choices, simplifications, and power relations also affect this perspective. (Taira 2004, 123; Repstad 1999 [1987], 52; Spickard 2002) Thus, even with the best will I can produce only partial representations of my informants' lives, as well as of myself (Spickard 2009, 992–993; cf. Landers 2002, 103).

In the ethnographic description, otherness stands at the centre while the ethnographer strives to make it more comprehensible through his/her interpretations (Opas 2004, 157). To interpret requires placing the interpretation in relation to the social community of which the interpreter is a part (Vikström 2005, 8). The diverse dynamics that a research project consists of may transform and influence the researcher and the researched, the self and the other (Jacobs 2002, 99; cf. Opas 2004, 171), a feature I personally experienced very concretely in my research work. The time spent with this study had a remarkable impact on my worldview, offered me an efficient tool of self-reflection and had an impact on my identities as a Christian, a woman and a Finn (cf. Neitz 2002, 35)

The ethnographic approach often leads the researcher to reflect on questions of ethics (Opas 2004, 176; cf. Tweed 2002, 68). These ethical perspectives permeate the whole research process and within its framework, the responsibility for all decisions and choices rests on the shoulders of the researcher (Kuula 2006, 21 and 34–35). Even though the power relations might vary in situations of interaction in the fieldwork, the power over the research material and its use always remains in my hands, as I am writing a study based on it (cf. Kuula 2006, 138–139). In setting about my work I committed myself to the norms of research ethics, which affected my working methods on different levels. In particular I sought to ensure the level of the reliability of the knowledge gained through analysis, and to respect the norms that embody the human value of the informants as well as those that shape the relationships between scholars (cf. Kuula 2006, 24). Furthermore, I strove to guarantee the privacy and anonymity of my informants. This meant particularly to render impossible their identification through the text (and the archive material), as well as careful storage of all information, as was agreed upon in the interview situation. Due to the fact that the research topic involves a minority group in a country where social networks are active, important and wide, these aspects had more significance. Also, some of the women knew about the participation of the others. The geographical dispersion of the women who participated in the study was, however, a factor that supported their anonymity.

When it came to respect for the sovereignty of all the informants, I tried at all times to create an atmosphere where they would feel free to refuse or agree to be a part of the research project, once I had informed them about what it concerned. In this way I sought to give to the participants the opportunity to understand that the material they provided me with as a researcher would be described, interpreted and used to produce texts for research purposes, in order to gain an informed consent on the part of interviewees. What can be considered as a sufficient amount of information remains, nevertheless, contextually defined. (Cf. Kuula 2006, 137, 141 and 146) I also informed the participants of the possibility of making changes in the gathered material at later stages in the process of producing the text (cf. Kuula 2006, 61 and 65). In addition, I chose to interview women who had turned eighteen and were therefore adults and could decide for themselves if they wanted to be a part of the project. I made this decision in order to avoid possible confusion when asking for permission from family members.

Within the framework of the research process, I have at all times aimed at being equitable, honest and respectful towards all the people I meet.<sup>18</sup> This was a particular concern in relation to the interviewees as I developed the interview relationships and explained the contents of my project to them. (Cf. Kuula 2006, 139–140; Seidman 1998, 34; Spickard 2002, 246–249) Due to the fact that I found it at times very difficult to exhaustively define what exactly in my research might be considered as a delicate topic of discussion, I left this task to the interviewees. I told them that they at any time were allowed to interrupt the interview or to skip questions if they felt the need to do so. In this sense the situational and cultural factors had a role in my work, as the tensions in the local and global contexts influenced the interviewees and their willingness to answer the questions or to be a part of the research project (cf. Kuula 2006, 136 and 142). The normative ethical guidelines did not always give direct answers to the questions I faced in the field or in the course of the study, nor did they liberate me from my responsibility as a scholar, but they helped in situating and analyzing ethical problems and searching for answers in the practical context (cf. Kuula 2006, 31 and 59).

Whether religious traditions are researched, either by a member of the studied tradition (insider) or one observing it from outside (outsider), they have both been considered to have their strengths and weaknesses as far as the perspectives these positionings offer are concerned (Opas 2004, 167 and 169; Spickard and Landers 2002, 5) Graham Harvey has challenged this dichotomy ‘between the twin temptations of objectivity and subjectivity’ in a way that is most welcome from my point of view. He thinks that the dichotomies ‘hinder the acquisition of knowledge, prevent understanding, and especially, disable the continuous process of debate’, which is one of the pertinent characteristics of an academic project. (Harvey 2004, 169) Also, as James Spickard points out, the regulative ideal of equality plays an important role in post-colonial ethnography: ethnographers are not the superiors to the people whose lives they view. Commitment to this ideal of equality empowered me to take the people I interviewed more seriously (Spickard 2002, 246 and 251; Spickard 2009, 996–997, 999 and 1001).

I share Harvey’s view of the significant necessity of openness in the research process. It allows for the possible changes that might occur

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<sup>18</sup> Other options to do research were however occasionally available such as proposed ideas of paying the interviewees for the interview or using authority to make the women participate.

during the process in the researcher's person, at the same time as it permits us to discover 'that those with whom we dialogue know more than we do about important matters' or can provide us with information from a different perspective than which is already known to us.<sup>19</sup> This position welcomes 'the opportunity to revise the life ways and thought patterns' and can be considered as that of a *guest* (Harvey 2004, 171 and 180). '[T]he role of 'guest' cannot solve all the problems associated with doing ethnography, [but] it can provide an ethical and respectful position from which to face these challenges' (Harvey 2004, 171). This *guesthood* can challenge dysfunctional encounters<sup>20</sup> and the dichotomies related to them, but it is not something that would be available from a distance or for those who insist to enter. Rather, it is an opportunity for those 'who acknowledge and respect the prestige of their hosts' and 'seek a common ground that recognises the priority of the hosts' (Harvey 2004, 180–181). During my time in the field, I sought to fulfil these high ideals. The results of this study will show how successful my efforts have been.

Harvey continues to challenge the traditional dichotomy by saying that '[r]esearchers are neither insiders nor outsiders, but are always participants in processes of change' (Harvey 2004, 180). My diverse and continuously changing identities and positions in the course of research evidently impacted on my work (cf. Landers 2002, 101; Opas 2004, 169; Tweed 2002, 73), as my hopes, flexibility and subjectivity also reflected on the research results (cf. Svanberg 2004, 15). Thus, my person was a part of the research (cf. Landers 2002, 102 and 105; Opas 2004, 169; Spickard 2009, 992), as the 'academic researchers are not – and have never been – detached or uninvolved' (Harvey 2004, 170). At different stages of the research process, I encountered different aspects of this researcher's positionality. Acknowledging the thoughts of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1999 [1991]) I saw myself equipped with a pair of *Western eyes* that influenced the perspective I observed my research field from. Being aware of this, my efforts were not to remake or reinforce the sorts of mistakes in my research, which result from the uneven power relationships, which may prevail between the different cultural spheres which are involved. (Harvey 2004, 179)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Spickard 2002, 247.

<sup>20</sup> Some relationships are dysfunctional, colonial, oppressive, and detrimental to the goal of increased understanding' (Harvey 2004, 180)

<sup>21</sup> My study does not examine women in a third world context, but I find parts of Mohanty's criticism to be also well directed at my research field.

Religion as a cultural phenomenon often resides in the perception of the researcher and in the field of comparative religion, religion can be understood as the researcher's abstraction of an element of a culture. Religion and how it is defined and recognized, is not, however, a purely academic or theoretical matter; it is also tied up with power relationships. (Taira 2004, 121) Therefore, I have made efforts not to consider the economic, religious, juridical or family structures in my research field as issues that I could measure and value on a 'Western scale' that I am familiar with to avoid falling for ethnocentric generalizations (Cf. Mohanty 1999, 261–262). My aim was also not to describe the group of informants as a monolithic entity and I sought to emphasize the interviewees' individual experiences from a critical, scientific distance. I considered Mohanty's warnings against generalizations of the perceptions defining the notions of social gender, gender difference or patriarchal hierarchy<sup>22</sup> that would be valid in all contexts at all times (Mohanty 1999, 235–236), as these kinds of generalizations are often identified with essentialism. However, to some extent I have used some strategic generalizations and applied certain universals with contextually considered qualifications in the aim to improve the understanding of the topic (cf. Joy 2006, 24).

My choice to work on this subject is closely related to my person and to the opportunities that life has offered to me to become more familiar with Albanian culture and Islam. With time, I also found that a wide ranging set of themes emerging from the topic have intertwined with my own life experience. The research process has made me create and feel a connection with the people and places concerned – aspects that have evidently become part of me. The position from which I have attempted to make my interpretations could be described as being formed of attentive listening combined with critical distance (cf. Vikström 2005, 27). The maintenance of sufficient distance made it possible to attain knowledge, just as involvement and openness were necessary to learn about other people's lives. The knowledge produced and gathered in this study is related to a conceptual framework with the help of which I described and explained the researched social reality and my perspective as a researcher might differ from that of the participants (cf. Verkuyten 2006, 34–35; Tweed 2002, 71). In sum, I have sought to meet the ideals of a hermeneutical ethnographic analysis, which is a meaning-making process, guided by the aim to keep alive the reciprocity between the many facets it consists of: material,

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<sup>22</sup> As patriarchy is not monolithic and neither are women (Vuorela 1999, 29).



theories, the researcher's positioning and his/her personal interpretations (cf. Illman 2007, 72; Nynäs 2001, 22).

### **About the Concepts, Names, Terms and Toponyms Used**

I wish to share some thoughts about the concepts, names, terms and toponyms used in this study before going any further. The subject of this study gathers together many issues that might act as sources of misunderstandings and disapprovals. However, I have tried at all times to examine and argue all the indispensable aspects of the study with the most thorough consideration in order to produce an analysis which is as well-grounded as possible.

I would like to add specifically that when it comes to historical events mentioned and proper nouns used that the choices I have made do not aim at any kind of particular side-taking which respect to political or historical issues. My main goal has been to make the contextual understanding of the subject easier for the reader. With these qualifications in mind, I would like to invite the reader to understand that the same aim applies to the toponyms used. These have been chosen to augment the clarity of the contents of this thesis. While referring to the geographical territory of Macedonia, I mean the whole of it, unless other terms are used to qualify this definition. The notion of Macedonia has had different meanings over the course of centuries and I discuss some of these in more detail at the beginning of Chapter Three. When speaking of events after the Macedonian state's declaration of independence in 1991, I use the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia. I give a table where the names of the most important Macedonian cities can be found in Albanian, Greek, Macedonian, Serbian and Turkish in Appendix I. When I speak of Macedonians, I mean the Slavic inhabitants of the state, if other definitions are not used to qualify the term.

Regarding the terminology that is used to describe and explain Islamic religious practice or theological or dogmatic issues which are predominantly of Arabic origin, I have chosen to use in parallel two forms, Arabic and Turkish, as these were the ones that the women interviewed themselves used. There were also some Albanian or local terms used that I explain as a part of the more extensive Islamic vocabulary, which can be found in Appendix II. The terms included in this vocabulary are written in italics in the text, when they appear for the first time. Regarding the Arabic terms I have chosen to write them

in a more simple form and have often left, for example, the diacritical marks for longer vowels aside. As the Professor of Islamic studies and the Arabic language at Helsinki University, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila (2004a, 10), has pointed out, readers who know Arabic, know how and where to place the needed details in transliterated form and for those who are not familiar with the language, these signs are not of much use. The Turkish versions of the often originally Arabic terminology might include letters that the Arabic alphabet does not have. With these choices in mind I aim at making the style of the text coherent and its contents more easily contextualized. The concepts of *Islamist* and *fundamentalist* are used in such a way that the former refers mainly to the political activism and the latter to more dogmatic issues. However, this division is not so easy to define and demarcate exhaustively in all contexts (cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 11). With the term *Islamic* I refer to things and phenomena which are in some way related to Islam, or considered as such.

The interviewees have been given Arabic pseudonyms and the spelling of the names follows more closely the Arabic orthography than the Albanian one. The names do not have any connection to the actual names of the women and they have been given particularly in order to facilitate the reader's ability to follow the interviewees' narratives in the text. In the interview excerpts, I have inserted in some grammatical corrections, which are separated from the actual phrase with square brackets. When I have left out something from an interview excerpt, for example in the case of a repetition of, or of searching for words, hesitation or ambiguity of expression, I have marked this in the text with three dots inside square brackets. When there has been discussion in some other language than English in the course of the interview, I have started a new line in order to mark more clearly how the interaction went on. In many of the excerpts this is replaced by square brackets with three dots inside, so that the excerpts would have a more compact textual form. My aim has been to remain loyal to the expressions used in the interviews and modifications are done only to effectively highlight the key ideas being expressed in the answers that the interviewees have given. If the interview was done with an interpreter's assistance I mention it in those excerpts that are indented. I discuss the issues associated with the involvement of an interpreter in more detail in Chapter Four when I introduce the women interviewed and my working methods in the field.

The following chapter introduces the theoretical framework of the study and discusses the concept of identity, as well as those particular

identities, which have a key significance for the study and facilitate the structuring of the material.

## 2 Identity as a Theory

### Comprehending Identity

Although the concept of *identity* has been employed in various academic fields for a longer period of time, it currently enjoys a popularity previously unseen (Verkuyten 2006, 39). The extensively and active use of the term has led to a kind of inflation of its analytical applicability. Because '[n]owadays, identity seems to be everywhere; as a consequence, it is nowhere' (Verkuyten 2006, 40). It is a laborious task to define identity, but the concept seems to be at the same time as indispensable as it is unclear (Liebkind 1984, 157). Also, as Marcus Moberg notes: 'In much research on the topic, terms such as "self", "subject", and "identity" are often used interchangeably' (Moberg 2009, 33; cf. Côté and Levine 2002, 68). When these differences in meanings are overlooked and confused, they can lead to widely differing uses and understandings of the term (Verkuyten 2009, 40–41). I begin this chapter by discussing how the concept of identity is comprehended in this study and how it is related to identification processes. Then I treat briefly the meaning of categorization for identity formation and the enduring and dynamic aspects of identity. Finally, I elaborate views on the personal and social dimensions of identity, whereafter I introduce the integrative social psychological view applied in this study.

My understanding of identity is derived from Stuart Hall's views on how it is formed over time through unconscious processes. The cohesion of identity is always, at least to some extent, illusory, and by its very nature identity is incomplete; it is continuously in process and constantly forming and modifying itself. That is why attention can be directed more towards the continuous identification processes identity is exposed to, rather than consider identity's character as completed. (Hall 1999, 39) Regarding identification processes, Verkuyten argues that '[i]dentification entails a psychological – intentional or unintentional – process, no matter how socially influenced and shaped this process is. Individuals identify with a group, and the process of identification depends on personal characteristics, preferences, needs, experiences, and circumstances' (Verkuyten 2006, 64). Hence, like the concept of identity, identification is determined by both personal and social denominators. Identification, or self-identification, in this study, is a process in which a person develops and modifies his/her identity in the framework of a relation towards the other. This process

can have a significant depth at both affective and cognitive levels and be directed towards different kinds of objects, concrete and fictive. Identification can emerge from a person's internal or external need to reach for something to identify with. (Nynäs 2007, 103–105) Thus, the existence of an individual identity is motivated by the need for an identity to be completed from the outside. This process can materialize in the various ways in which we consider others perceive us in our own imagination. (Hall 1999, 39)

The elements of a person's identity may be ascribed, achieved or internalized. Ascribed characteristics can consist of such traits as skin colour, gender or age even though their ultimate meaning is often defined by the social environment that gives them different emphasis. (Cf. Liebkind 1984, 158) Achieved identity characteristics can be, for example, one's profession, political activities or other issues based on voluntary participation. Internalized characteristics are defined in the context of interaction, such as tendencies to dominate or to submit. (Liebkind 1984, 159) Elements of an identity can be positively or negatively valued, 'but by different categories of people differently and for different reasons' (Verkuyten 2009, 42). Therefore comprehending an identity and identity formation implies understanding the variation and diversity that are included in the process (Verkuyten 2009, 42).

Identity formation can be rooted in political classifications or categorizations. It may be motivated by clearly distinguishable behaviour (e.g. language, religious or other kinds of rituals and traditions) or originate from the feeling or idea of difference. However, as Verkuyten points out: 'Among other things, the identity formation has to do with the question of who is able to construct socially relevant categorizations' (Verkuyten 2006, 56). Naming and categorizations create a ground for the use of power included in the formation of local, national and international loyalties (Bringa 1995, 29). And 'an ethnically heterogeneous society is particularly sensitive to the way the language is used. Each label has its own connotations and implicitly reflects a certain position' (Verkuyten 2006, 7). This assertion can be regarded as particularly relevant in the case of diversified Macedonian society. The way an object is valued can depend on the way it is named and different labels may also be subject to important disagreements (Verkuyten 2006, 7). All kinds of categorizations imply some kind of selection, because they render some chosen characteristics meaningful (Verkuyten

2006, 44). Thus, the choice of particular terms to label groups may not be regarded as neutral (Verkuyten 2006, 57). Categorization also influences those who are categorized, as it 'implies being treated or institutionalized in that [particular] way' (Verkuyten 2006, 18). The categorization of human beings involves an interactive human component that makes possible the response of those who are categorized, which for their part can change the meanings or functions of the categorizations imposed (Verkuyten 2006, 18).<sup>23</sup>

The divisions and differentiations that cleave the social world can be employed in order to say something about individuals. Socially defined categories may be sources of labelling and categorizing, along the lines of for instance sex, age, ethnicity, culture, nationality and legal status. They may also be used in self-definition. (Verkuyten 2006, 44) Verkuyten considers that analytically a distinction should be drawn between *social identity* as something socially constructed and the *sense of an identity* as an intrapsychic phenomenon (Verkuyten 2006, 20). Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasize that the relationship between the individual, the *producer*, and the social world, the *product s/he* has created, is continuously dialectal and interactive (Berger and Luckmann 1994 [1966], 76). Hence, society and individuals may be perceived as distinct, but inextricably interconnected on the ontological levels. These interdependent levels are also 'capable of exerting deterministic force on, or transforming, the other' (Davies 2008, 20). Thus, '[t]he assertion that identity is the product of the interaction of the individual with influences in the physical and social world is [therefore] not new' (Liebkind 2006, 85).

Identification cannot produce a ready-made social identity; identity claims often need to be recognized and validated by significant others (Verkuyten 2006, 65). In other words, social identity is strongly linked to the relationship an individual has with his/her environment. It is about socially defined and recognized distinctions and designations. When social identity is defined, it centres on such characteristics that the individuals share with some and that differentiate them from others. It indicates how the individual is socially defined in a particular respect. Emphasis is not on what makes the person unique, but on the similarities that a person shares with some and that differentiate her/him from some others. (Verkuyten 2006, 42–44)

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. the natural kind of categorization; meaning categorizing something one cannot have an interaction with. Thus, the categorization cannot be negotiated.

Emphasizing social circumstances in identity formation should not lead into an understanding whereby individuals are perceived as passive objects or receivers exposed to social determination. Social circumstances are the result of human action and their nature is changing. As Verkuyten points out: 'Common meanings and requirements are appropriated and adjusted to concrete situations, existing understandings are rejected and resisted and initiatives for change are always there' (Verkuyten 2006, 55). These developments are predefined and limited in the cultural and structural context, but '[s]ocial categories can be questioned, behavioural expectations can be challenged, and existential definitions can be rejected' (Verkuyten 2006, 55).

The relevance of an historical dimension in the process of identity formation means that local circumstances, often linked to experiences of stability and continuity, do play a significant role. As Verkuyten concludes:

*Identities are not only context-specific positions and meanings that change situationally. The flexible processes of categorization and boundary drawing for defining an identity are not more important than the contents of that identity. [...] The crucial emphasis on situation and change, should not lead to ignoring continuity and stability.*  
(Verkuyten 2006, 54)

In addition to space, identities are also tied to time when certain issues crystallize around the notion of identity. Recent controversies regarding identity have often involved questions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and religion. (Roald 2001, 12) The question of identity can also be, as Roald suggests, 'a question of *distinctiveness* and *oppositonality*, i.e. that which makes a person or a group *distinctive* from other persons or groups or that which makes them *oppositional* to others' (Roald 2001, 12). John Joseph, while elaborating on *sameness* and *uniqueness* in identity construction, notes that these two as *oppositional* to each other actually intertwine: 'Identity-as-sameness is principally recognized through contact with what is different, while identity-as-uniqueness is established largely through the intersection of identity-as-sameness categories' (Joseph 2004, 37: cf. Ammerman 2003, 209–210). Identity of the individual, identity-as-uniqueness, level includes distinctive characteristics, such as personality, as well as physical and intellectual traits. Tensions may emerge between individual meanings and social definitions of one's identity. (Roald 2001, 12–13) For instance what is understood as belonging to the women's sphere may vary between families and individuals among the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia, even though there are customary, often shared and ac-

knowledge, conceptions regarding these issues. The understanding of identity is a constant process of negotiation in which the concept is redefined through active interaction with different counterparts. 'In that sense, identities are never finished but are rather like unresolved issues in an ongoing debate' (Verkuyten 2006, 54; cf. Neumann 2007, 32).

### **An Integrative View on Identity**

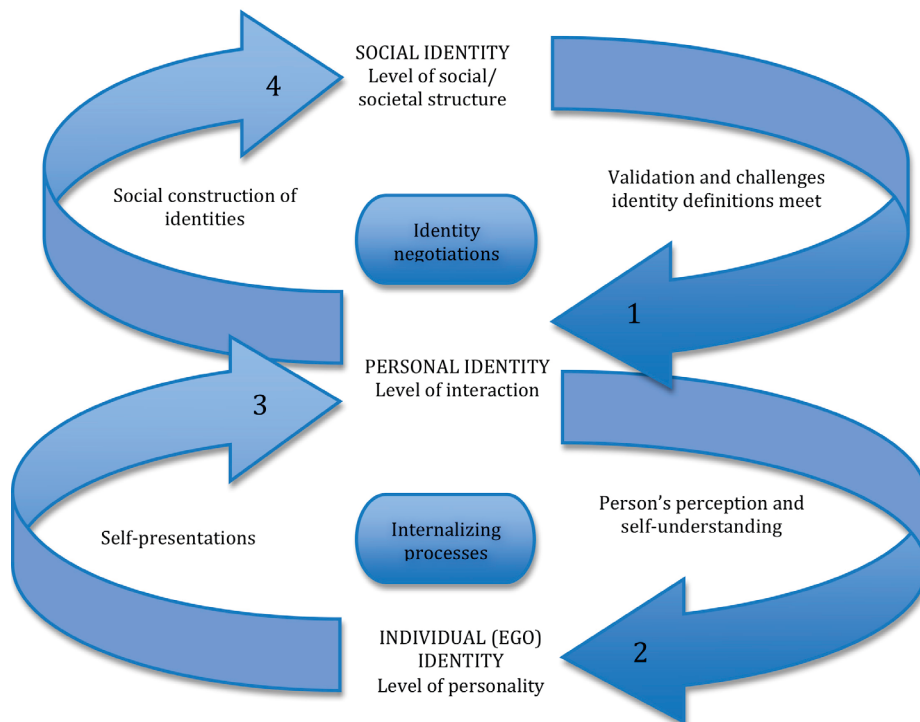
Sociological and psychological approaches to identity often differ when it comes to the understanding on the 'locus' of identity. Psychological approaches can tend to see identity 'within the individual' whereas sociological ones may propose that identity is rather "'realized strategically and circumstantially" through one's interaction with others' (Côté and Levine 2002, 48–49). Thus, the use of a social psychological perspective, which combines both, can give a fuller conception of the development and functioning of identity (Côté and Levine 2002, 67; cf. Neumann 2007). Combining the approaches renders possible the use of three analytical levels: the level of social structures, the *societal level*, where social identity can be placed, *the level of interaction* where personal identity can be discussed, and the level of personality for individual identity, that is, *an individual level* (Côté and Levine 2002, 131; Verkuyten 2006, 19). These levels also have active mutual articulations, which represent people's attempts to make sense in and give order to their lives (Côté and Levine 2002, 131).

In the following figure is presented the social psychological model of identity formation and maintenance processes, which articulate the levels of analysis applied in this study. The model is an adapted version of models in J. E. Côté and C. G. Levine (2002, 131 and 137), and Maykel Verkuyten (2006, 19).



**Figure 1.**

*Identity formation and maintenance processes*



Social psychological model of identity formation, maintenance processes and levels of analysis applied in this study. Model is an adapted version of models in Côté and Levine 2002, 131, and 137 and Verkuyten 2006 [2005], 19.

What is illustrated in the figure represents an iterative process that consists of four analytically distinct parts and is in continuous motion as people associate themselves to groups and undertake communication processes (Côté and Levine 2002, 132–133). The three levels of analysis are placed between the arrows, which illustrate the reciprocal relation between an individual's identity and the social world. The societal level is the one that the individuals continually maintain through the social construction of identities (arrow 4). Societal level also validates or challenges the construction of the personal identities (arrow 1). This bilateral interaction can be perceived as identity negotiations. The level of interaction is the meeting point of all four arrows. It is where the two above mentioned meet and develop the identity processes at the individual level. Arrow 2 illustrates how the social

experiences play a role in a person's perception and self-understanding, and arrow 3 shows the impact that individual's self-presentations have on his/her positioning in the direction of the social world. The individual level at the bottom of the figure is the crossroads of bilateral internalizing processes; between a person's perception and self-understanding that are directed towards him/her as an impact of the social environment, and the self-presentations the individual aims to project into the social world.

## **Identity as a Crossroads**

In this section, my aim is to come to an understanding of identity as a crossroads of many elements and relate this theoretical view also to the Macedonian context.

'An individual fits into many different categories, some of which are shared with some people, some with others, never all of them with anyone else' (Verkuyten 2006, 43; cf. Ammerman 2003, 216; Joseph 2004, 37). Thus, the characteristics of each individual are both unique and shared. Individual and social identities can be separated from one another, but the boundaries remain somewhat blurred, as the image one has of oneself is dependent on the social environment one is a part of. (Liebkind 1984, 153) Identity can be understood as an ontological and social question as well as an event (Utraiainen 2006, 13) and it 'is always multi-layered: every person maintains a variety of identities, i.e. belongs to several categories and groups of people at the same time' (Duijzings 2000, 19). Despite the convergence of different identities, they do not necessarily overlap entirely (Duijzings 2000, 21). Social identities can be diversified; they may correspond to each other, create contrasts, even be in contradiction or end up in mutual states of conflict. Circumstances define which social identities 'are psychologically more salient and sociologically prominent' (Verkuyten 2006, 50).

One of a multitude of possible social identities may have a more crucial and highly absorbing significance for an individual. In such cases this one identity eclipses the others and can be meaningful in almost every situation, due to the way it guides and to some extent even determines the individuals in their 'interpretation and judgement of

other people's behaviour' towards them, as well as their 'experience of all the other aspects of what someone is' (Verkuyten 2006, 52). This kind of placing of an identity in the forefront of people's minds seems to characterize the societal strivings particularly associated with ethnic and national identities in the Republic of Macedonia.

Social identities can be perceived as processes that develop throughout a person's life. A person's social identity lies at the crossroads of memberships of different groups. (Liebkind 1984, 153) Joseph however sees this 'crossing' as a less remarkable than the perception 'that there are categories rigid enough to be crossed' (Joseph 2004, 171). People belonging to the same group do not necessary all identify themselves with it to the same extent. They differ also in how much space they give to group memberships in their identity. (Liebkind 1984, 153) Membership of a certain social group may, at least momentarily, be supposed to outweigh all the differences between the individuals within that group (Verkuyten 2006, 43).

Duijzings considers that in the emergence and transformation of ethnic and religious identities decisive roles are played by the state and by the impact of wider political developments (Duijzings 2000, 22). It is often in the interest of states and institutions to mould persons according to one single identity, as this situation is less challenging to maintain stable (Duijzings 2000, 23; cf. de Singly 2003, 84).<sup>24</sup> Identities tend to be more fluid and ambivalent if they are located in a peripheral position, which means that they can be made and unmade with less effort than, for example, the identities typical of modern industrial societies. In a way similar to the situation in the region of Kosovo which Duijzings speaks about, the Republic of Macedonia has a relatively long history of being a somewhat peripheral region within different states (including, for example, Medieval Serbia and Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire and Yugoslavia). With reference to Duijzing's thoughts, this could argue for a tendency towards more fluid and less institutionalized group boundaries and more ambiguous and situational identities. This could imply that the current situation of a more clear-cut labelling of distinct identities is a more recent phenomenon (cf. Duijzings 2000, 24). Such fluidity can be motivated by the existence of minority groups struggling to find their place in the dominant classification system (Duijzings 2000, 24). In the Republic of Macedo-

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<sup>24</sup> The concept of ethnic cleansing, which one very often comes across in Balkan studies, can include, in addition to the extermination of the members of a certain group, also the extermination of alternative identity choices (Duijzings 2000, 23).

nia, for example the Torbešis, Slavic-speaking Muslims, the Albanians belonging to the Bektashi brotherhood or the Turkish-Albanians (see Chapter Three) could be considered as examples of such minority groups. Group boundaries as such are however never unproblematic: 'There is always friction between the ideal ethnic and religious models or ideologies, produced by the states and religious regimes, and the social reality to which they refer' (Duijzings 2000, 24–25).

An identity's fluidity can also mean that it has multiple dimensions (de Singly 2003, 84). Identity is not only the intersection of group memberships; it is also the point where the past and the future meet. How people see themselves depends on the image they have of themselves in the past and in the future. The interaction between one's actual identity and the identity one is striving to achieve determines the direction of one's identity development. As a parallel, this dynamic development also moulds the continual process of self-evaluation that is self-esteem. (Liebkind 1984, 159) The *identity shifts* that Ger Duijzings (2000) and Nathalie Clayer (2001) mention occurring in the regions of Kosovo and in the Republic of Macedonia often happen as a consequence of political changes and can be motivated by, for example, political pressure or the desire to adopt a more 'convenient' or 'better' identity. These shifts often take place 'between groups who share some important characteristics such as language or religion, and use that common trait to bridge the gap' (Duijzings 2000, 26).

The emergence of different kinds of solidarities between the ethnic and national groups in the Republic of Macedonia is often motivated by political or socio-economic issues, which manifest themselves particularly before the censuses<sup>25</sup> and become visible in their results. Mixed marriages might have a role in the choice of national determi-

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<sup>25</sup> Victor A. Friedman describes the census in the Republic of Macedonia in 1994: 'Questions of ethnic identity, citizenship, language rights, and the interrelationships of the concepts of language, religion and "nationality" were hotly contested and rendered the census clearly a political event rather than statistical exercise it was officially claimed to be' (Friedman 1996). This chaos surrounding the census was and is motivated by every group's legitimisation in relation to other societal groups. This legitimisation is considered to be dependent on the statistical proofs and justified by the number of group members. (Andonovski 1998, 72) The importance of the census was developed in Tito's time and was related to the number of representatives that each ethnic group could have, especially in the higher institutional bodies. The ethnic background of the political leaders reflected the composition of the population within eight administrative units of the Socialist Yugoslavia. When the census results effected directly the distribution and the use of political power, they acquired a role almost like that of an election in the society. (Bianchini 1996, 130–131)

nation as well as the phenomena of the 'Albanization' or 'Turkification' of the people. This implies that people might be exposed to a political situation, which improves the status of a certain group. To give a hypothetical illustration, such a situation might be one in which, for example, all Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia would preferably be considered Albanians or Turks, so that the other existing identities would be cast aside. Also, sometimes some identities might be considered to have higher status or maybe be better or more appropriate to the sense of belonging that people have in the region. (Cf. Clayer 2001, 179; Duijzings 2000, 26)<sup>26</sup>

In my estimation, the most accurate understanding of identity in the context of my study follows the definition presented by Roald. She sees identity

*[A]s those factors of a person's or a group's belief-system, nationality, ethnicity and class, educational background, rural or urban background, gender or sexuality which are highlighted at certain periods of time and in certain places in such a way that the various levels of identity are negotiable depending on the circumstances.*  
(Roald 2001, 14)

Thus, when a Muslim for instance encounters a non-Muslim, Islam often tends to become an identity marker regardless of what kind of relation the specific person in question has to Islamic religiosity. The quest for identity also can become more accentuated in minority situations, when 'these matters can be contrasted with mainstream opinions or characteristics and are rendered more problematic' (Roald 2001, 14). The concern for identity in relation to the uncertainty of life and its limits has not disappeared in the current circumstances and the question of identity remains in this sense both eternal and local. Identities are always unfinished and on the move and can be perceived as temporary positionings of uncertainty and movement in that kind of connection which is relatively solid and stable. (Utrianen 2006, 13–14) Hence, one way to perceive identity can be to consider it as a crossroads where, in different ways emphasized and meaningful group memberships and unique characteristics of each individual intersect with contextual denominators in time and space.

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<sup>26</sup> The impact of these factors can be perceived in the censuses of the Republic of Macedonia (Clayer 2001, 179).



## Diverse Identities

*Not every woman is a woman,  
not every man a man;  
God did not make identical  
the fingers of one hand.  
(Persian verse, in Schimmel 1999 [1995], 78)*

The question of identity in this particular field of study cleaves, overlaps and intertwines upon several ways of identifying oneself. Even though identity is a dynamic entity that consists of different aspects of a changing nature, in this section I discuss some of the components of identity that are often considered to be more enduring and that also have a crucial part to play in this study. The emphasis of this study is on identity questions related to religion, but in the context of the study these intertwine with nationality, ethnic belonging and gender, as well as how these different dimensions of identity interact. These 'pieces of identity' are not understood as being separate from each other, rather they form an entity of interdependent components, which are continuously defined and re-defined in relation to the surrounding environment and to each other. In this section I examine firstly the questions linked to national identity. Secondly, I discuss ethnic identity and then the relation between gender and identity. Finally, I elaborate on characteristics of religious and particularly Muslim identity.

To arrive at the criteria that define the human collectivities in the world as nations is laborious. Often this labelling has been based on one single aspect 'such as language, common territory, common history, cultural traits or whatever else' (Hobsbawm 1990, 5). To aim at a more comprehensive understanding, nations can be understood as symbolic communities and cultural representation systems; the citizens participate in the idea of nation, which manifests itself in national culture (Hall 1999, 46). National culture may be considered as a discourse, which directs and organizes the way individuals within the given culture function. It also plays a role in what kind of understanding individuals have of themselves. National cultures build identities through producing meanings tied to the nationhood, which the individuals can identify with. These meanings may be perceived, for example, in the stories told about the nation, in memories that tie the present context to the past of the nation and in images that are used to construct the past. (Hall 1999, 47) In the Albanian narratives emphasis is often placed on the authenticity and originality of the Albanian nation among the Balkan populations. These historically justified narra-

tives connect the present to the ancient past and its heroes, which then also mould the understanding of the current circumstances; discourses that can be encountered among most of the nations worldwide. However in the Balkans national history and historical myths are often used with the aim of claiming one's right over a certain territory, or in telling a story of the nation, often filled with descriptions of injustices the nation has faced.

Benedict Anderson argues that nations are *imagined political communities* and that they have been imagined as both internally limited and sovereign (Anderson 2007 [1983], 39). Even though the unity of the community is imagined, the idea of unity and a shared brotherhood, however, often lives on in the individual minds. (Anderson 2007, 41) According to Hall, in order to tell the story of a national culture five types of representational strategies can be used. The first is based on a *story of the nation* as it manifests itself in national history, media, popular culture or literature. The second one is the *emphasis put on the origin*, continuity, tradition and timelessness of identity. Thus, *national identity* is described as something original that has always existed as part of the very nature of things. It might at some point have been less visible, but it has always been there. The third discourse is related to Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's work *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) that underlines the connection with historical continuity and the past through conventions, which are understood as traditions. These might, however, be of a much younger and even invented nature than at first appears. The fourth discourse is based on a *myth of origin*, which positions the origin of nationhood and the nation with its particular character in a time so ancient that it becomes blurred into the hazy mythical era. The fifth possibility is the *symbolic idea of one pure and original nation*, which promotes the perception of an over time unchanged national entity. By means of these discourses the national culture can build identities that in multidimensional ways are placed between the past and the future. (Hall 1999, 47–50; cf. Hobsbawm 1990, 11) The Albanian perspective on its own history, that I witnessed, was characterized by its use of at least four of these discourses. Continuity, timelessness and the eternal quality of a national identity, as well as its originality and symbolic purity, were often elaborated in a range of discussions I had in the field. However, Albanians were not the only ones using these kinds of rhetorical devices.

National identities are often represented as uniform, even though all modern nations are products of a cultural mix (Hall 1999, 54–55). National identities do not cover all the forms of diversity present



within the areas they represent, nor are they uncontaminated by the interaction that takes place between the various differences and loyalties that overlap and cross each other there, in terms of the use of power, internal divisions and other contradictory elements (Hall 1999, 56; Hobsbawm 1990, 11). National identification can change and shift over time and 'national consciousness' also develops unevenly among diverse social groups and regions (Hobsbawm 1990, 11–12). Nevertheless national identities tend to acquire more importance as a source of identification than, other more specific sources of cultural identification (Hall 1999, 57). The unclear, shifting and ambiguous meanings given to the concepts of nation, ethnicity and language make 'them unusually convenient for propagandist, and programmatic, as distinctive from descriptive purposes' (Hobsbawm 1990, 6). These meanings have unfortunately often been instrumental in triggering conflicts in the Balkans, also in the Macedonian context, even in the recent past.

Macedonian society is a multicultural entity with a complex history and a demanding societal framework. For this reason one often comes across the concepts of *ethnicity* and *ethnic identity* in this field of research. The term ethnicity has its roots primarily in anthropology and ethnology, but the concept has been used and defined across disciplines. (Liebkind 2006, 78–79) Ethnic identity is a complex concept, which can be examined from a variety of different perspectives. Both ethnicity and ethnic identity can be perceived as socially defined and communicated and serving social functions. (Varjonen, Arnold and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2009, 52 and 55) There is also often some linkage between the definitions of ethnic identity and ethnicity and issues of origin and culture (Liebkind 2006, 78; cf. Joseph 2004, 162). Primarily, ethnicity can be considered as 'a sense of belonging to a particular ([possibly] assumed) ancestry and origin' whose main ingredients are history and culture (Liebkind 2006, 78–79). Ethnicity can also be manipulated, but not 'situationally created out of nothing' (Liebkind 2006, 79). Ethnicity may be ascribed to some extent, as one cannot choose the group one is born into, but it is also an achieved quality when the emphasis given to it within one's identity is observed (Liebkind 2006, 79; Liebkind 1984, 159).

Ethnicity resembles other social identities and is involved in primary socialization processes. It can have a very pervasive effect within one's identity. (Liebkind 2006, 79) Both ethnic and religious identities concern the entire human existence individually and collectively, as they are bound up with the deepest beliefs one has (Joseph 2004, 172). Most of the members of an ethnic group can identify with their group,

but this 'does not imply cultural distinctiveness, as culture may be in continual transformation' (Liebkind 2006, 80; cf. Liebkind 1984, 153). Therefore, ethnic identity should be examined contextually, as it, like ethnicity, 'is a dynamic construct that evolves and changes in response to contextual factors' (Liebkind 2006, 79 and 86). The more enduring aspects of an ethnic identity may emerge from long-term commitment and connections, for example between the generations. (Liebkind 2006, 79)

Ethnic identity should not be considered as inherently linked to minority questions as not all ethnic identities are minority identities. Because of the fact that the focus group of this study represents one of the minorities in Macedonian society, I will elaborate briefly issues related to *ethnic minority identity*. It is often assumed that ethnic identity derives from membership to only one group and that ethnic minorities define themselves in relation to the dominant majority, which is implicitly assumed to be the most meaningful significant other. The identity of an ethnic minority may however be 'dependent on a diversity of comparisons that are being made and their relation to each other. In multiethnic societies there is a variety of groups in relation to whom people define their ethnic identity' (Liebkind 2006, 87). In the Macedonian context there is a tendency to particularly underline ethnic differences. However, questions related to acceptance within one's own ethnic minority group and other issues within the group could be experienced as even more problematic and stressful for group's members than for example the possible negative attitudes of the majority group. (Liebkind 2006, 79) This implies that diverse forms of social construction are of great importance for ethnic minority identities (Verkuyten 2009, 47).

Ethnic groups have often formed a foundation for other relevant layers of society and have a role in its internal power structures. History has an impact on the developments of different cultural groups, and cultural differences can therefore be tied to historical experiences. The roots of these cultural differences diverge: some of them might be of a relatively recent provenance and others are embedded in the distant past of which no clear historical consciousness exists. (Liebkind 2006, 80) Ethnic behaviours may also communicate one's distinctive social identity; they can tell others who you are, to which group you probably belong, and what this group membership perhaps means to you (Verkuyten 2009, 48). Among group identities particularly ethnic and national ones may have both constructive and destructive functions. They can be constructive when giving people a sense of belonging to

a community and a sense of who they are. However, at the same time these identities are mainly constructed through an emphasis on the difference from the 'others'. This categorical distancing may become increasingly negatively significant if one cannot obtain this experience of belonging, or is even discouraged or inhibited to do so. Consequently, feelings of alienation with destructive consequences might then emerge from the experience (Joseph 2004, 46). Attraction towards difference, ethnicity and otherness may function as a balance to the tendencies of global homogenization. The new relations between *the local* and *the global* can produce new ways of perceiving and experiencing local and global identifications. (Cf. Frisk 2009; Hall 1999, 64) The influences of globalization, which tend to promote an inclusivity of everything and lead to a consequential process of relativization, might also be important elements in religious change (Frisk 2009).

### **Gender Identity**

This study focuses on the religiosities and identities of women and therefore a discussion concerning questions related to *gender* and identity, as well as what is understood by *gender identity*, follows. For many people, gender identity is something that one has never really needed to question or reflect upon, as it is perceived as being unquestionable and natural – a self-evident fact. Because of this gender may also function as an efficient tool in the use of power. (Aarnipuu 2008, 14; Pesonen 2003, 181) It can also be so meaningful and crucial that it tops 'the list of the various entries in a person's identity repertoire' (Joseph 2004, 63).

The issue of gender difference is one of the oldest areas of debate within feminist and political theory (Rosenberg 2006, 19). In research, the notion of gender has been given an extraordinary range of meanings (Joy 2006, 19). Earlier division between the biological (*sex*) and the social gender (*gender*) implied the idea of the existence of two genders: the one you are born with and another into which you are raised and socialized (Pesonen 2003, 181). This thought-provoking division between gender and sex has ever since been explained as non-determinative and 'initially imagined and culturally constructed' (Joy 2006, 11). The classic social criterion for gender has been that men and women should be recognized and distinguished from one another, and all additional gender variations have tended to end up outside this immediate intelligibility (Rosenberg 2006, 12; cf. Aarnipuu 2008, 15). Often the prevailing (hetero)normative attitudes assume that all

human beings are heterosexual and that the only natural way of living is that of a heterosexual. Through this normativity 'accepted' bodies are produced. (Rosenberg 2006, 12) This dichotomy between male and female has, however, revealed itself to be far from exhaustive (cf. Aarnipuu 2008, 121; Pesonen 2003, 182).

Judith Butler questions traditional perceptions of gender. She claims that to maintain gender as a norm is not really the same thing as to state that there are normative understandings about masculinity and femininity, which do exist. (Butler 2006 [2004], 59) Gender is not really what one 'is', nor is it precisely something one 'has' (Butler 2006, 59–60). The ways in which we express our gender is frequently related to the people we happen to be in interaction with (Aarnipuu 2008, 14). Even if gender is often considered as a self-evident fact on an external level, it simultaneously manages to raise deep and contradictory emotions. It may even be perceived as a sacred phenomenon, which demands continuous cultural defending and guarding. (Aarnipuu 2008, 15) From the Islamic perspective everything in the world has its own particular ways of behaving and functioning. Thus, also gender roles can be considered as clearly defined and having particular characteristics. Culturally produced gender roles, however, in general tend to vary depending on the culture and period of time. Gender roles may also be in contradiction with one's gender identity, particularly if within the roles a little space is left for interpretation. (Hallenberg 2008, 80)

Often the need to control the limits of gender is related to how gender overlaps with sexuality (Aarnipuu 2008, 16), which is closely related to the survival of a community. Due to this important role, sexuality has not been, in any culture, left outside societal and religious regulations and control. (Hallenberg 2008, 80) As the concept of 'gender is deeply implicated in the complex of social processes and institutions devoted to ancestry, sexual coupling, procreation and care of progeny, also one's gender role may be given particularistic meanings by one's ethnicity' (Liebkind 2006, 79; cf. Hallenberg 2008, 80). The categories of man and woman, male and female, might be used 'to express the distinctiveness of ethnic groups and nations; differences are often perceived in gendered terms' (Duijzings 2000, 20). Women, especially mothers and virgins, 'may symbolize the nation, and in times of war

they may be perceived as part of the (symbolic) territory that needs to be defended and conquered' (Duijzings 2000, 20–21). This is particularly typical for nationalist discourse (Bracewell 1996, 214).

The perception that we live and experience the world through our bodies makes accessible the idea of a subjective gender experience, as gender then is understood in relation to its environment. Therefore the division into social and biological gender becomes unnecessary and gender as a way to be and exist becomes a transformative concept. Diverse situational and temporal contexts continuously create new approaches to gender-related questions. Thus, gender can be defined according to shifting and somewhat blurred boundaries: it is in constant motion, in a process of change, and it is also negotiable (Pesonen 2003, 181). Furthermore, genetic gender does not guarantee a certain kind of gender identity (Aarnipuu 2008, 121). As Morny Joy states: '[J]ust as there is no one essential description of the female gender, there is no authentic cultural identity' (Joy 2006, 23). Despite the difficulties in formulating the concept of gender itself in a way that would take into account all its meanings, it can continue to provide, 'if astutely applied, a means of expression that is both critical and constructive' (Joy 2006, 26). Even though this study is not situated in the field of gender studies, the significance of gender identity is pervasively meaningful in the act of choosing the focus group, in the research results and in the issues related to the field research – how I as a female researcher have been received in the field and what kind of data I have been able to gather. Also, how I perceived the women I interviewed and the different groups in Macedonian society, as well as how they saw me, and women more generally, influenced the interactions we had.

### **Muslim Identity**

To complete this chapter I will discuss issues linked to religious and particularly *Muslim identity*. The *religious identity* of an individual may be ascribed, achieved or internalized. That is to say, it can be ascribed

as often one is born into certain religious group; achieved as one can strive to develop the religious identity to a certain direction; and internalized in relation to the social environment and the influence it exerts. (Cf. Liebkind 1984, 158; Day 2010, 18) In the post-modern world religious practices and affiliations can change over a lifetime. Thus, as Nancy Ammerman poignantly states, '[i]f religious identity ever was given, it certainly is no longer' (Ammerman 2003, 207). Hence, it is rather a result of choices than a matter of determinism. (Ammerman 2003, 207) Moberg discusses extensively the relationality of religious identity:

*[R]eligious identities are not constructed in a social and cultural vacuum. Importantly, when explicitly religious, spiritual, or other existential elements become integrated with a person's understanding of him/herself, it does so within a particular historical, social, cultural, and most importantly, relational context. The construction of religious identities may therefore be seen as being intimately tied to particular groups that are characterized by an emphasis on otherworldly concerns, of which institutional religions are clear examples.*  
(Moberg 2009, 37–38)

Thus, individual religious identities may be understood as being to some extent tied to a positive or negative relationship, which can take different forms, between a person and a certain societal, social or cultural group. And this group may have a certain kind of conceptualisation of otherworldly significance. This possible relationship between the individual and the group also has a time aspect. (Moberg 2009, 38) However, in order to exist religious identities do not necessarily need to have a contact with a group of some kind. Cultural, political, historical and legal contexts that define religion may provide frameworks for the everyday identity negotiations (Ammerman 2007b, 225). Hence, the construction of religious identities can be placed in particular religious settings but also in other institutional contexts, as the questions of power and domination, both secular and religious, are meaningful to it (Ammerman 2003, 222–223).

Like other identity elements, religious identity as well as religious beliefs<sup>27</sup>, or religions, are not static: they can change over time (Moberg 2009, 38). The space given to religious elements within an identity may, for example, change their 'size' or the emphasis given to them,

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<sup>27</sup> Day suggests that beliefs are performative and therefore they should be situated in specific contexts, times and places (Day 2010, 14), as the context influences which beliefs are expressed and which identities shaped (Day 2010, 18).

and so they may become more or less significant. Furthermore, the meanings given to religious issues can vary and different religious aspects may crystallize in different circumstances. Different parts of identity can also become more relevant for the identification of the person in relation to his/her environment. (Cf. Liebkind 1984, 153; Verkuyten 2006, 51–52) As with all human experience, women's religious experiences are also embodied and this embodiment is bound up with spatial experiences and boundaries. Ammerman sees these embodied practices as crucial as they can tell a story and show our location in it (Ammerman 2003, 215). Hence, '[t]he moves women make to live out their embodied religious and spiritual subjectivities, nevertheless, exist between subversion and compliance, and always in relation to prevailing social constructions' (Vincett, Sharma and Aune 2007, 11; cf. McGuire 2002b, 208–209 and 2008).

Even though religious identity often tends to be seen as tied to a group membership or a social context, I would like to complement the conception of religious identity with Roald's view: 'If religion is considered in transcendent terms, religious identity would be outside the realm of group identity and would apply at an individual level' (Roald 2001, 13). In turn, personal transcendental relationships or religious experiences are not something that would be necessarily required from an individual; instead religious institutions and practices can function as mediators in these (Ammerman 2007b, 225–226). Thus, religious identity may manifest itself in different ways at both personal and social levels, depending on how religion or religious sentiments are perceived. Therefore it can provide material for research on several analytical levels. (Roald 2001, 13) Religion can also have other functions than only the metaphysical one that aims at explaining the inexplicable. It may help understanding the events in one's personal life, function as a practical guide of behavior or facilitate the expression of intense emotions. (Roald 2001, 13–14) Individual religious identities may include features such as sense of connection and belonging and continuity, but are not limited to these. As McGuire concludes: 'In the very process of living and experiencing their religious identities, individuals creatively adapt and change, expressing their lived religion differently in changing life-stages, relationships, and cultural settings' (McGuire 2008, 209).

As this study concentrates particularly on Muslim identity, I observe here some aspects that are more specifically related to Islamic theology and dogmas. Roald notes that the Qur'an distinguishes between

groups: between Muslims of different categories,<sup>28</sup> as well as between non-Muslims, such as the People of the Book<sup>29</sup> and people belonging to other religions (Roald 2001, 21–22). Islamic classifications often refer to three main stages of belief<sup>30</sup>. A person who commits him/herself at least to the five pillars of Islam is considered a *Muslim*, the second stage being that of a *believer* (Roald 2001, 19). Being a believer includes ‘the belief in God, His angels, His books, His messengers and the Last Day, and the belief in divine destiny, both the good and the evil thereof’ (Roald 2001, 19–20). Thus, Muslim identity may be perceived as starting with orthopraxis and ascending to belief. The last stage is that of being a *muhsin*: the ‘one who has perfected the faith’ and it is allowed only to a few. It can be understood so that only the prophets and the *evliyas* have the opportunities to attain this stage. How the possibilities of ascending through this categorization system are perceived depends on the interpretative perspective chosen. (Cf. Roald 2001, 20) Anas Hajjar also discusses the difference between a Muslim and a believer. He sees that a Muslim is someone who has pronounced the confession of faith and a believer is a person who believes in six tenets of faith, listed above. (Hajjar 2008, 99) Wadud (2007, 23–24) strives for an image of a Muslim that would show greater agency exercised through personal conscientious participation. Therefore she uses the expression of an ‘engaged surrender’ when discussing the meaning of Islam in a Muslim’s life:

*The term engaged confirms human volition. A human can surrender but only through the autonomy of full consciousness. One can choose not to surrender. [...] Islam is the voluntary choice of surrender. Emphasis is placed upon the agent for the choice he or she makes to surrender to Allah’s will.*  
(Wadud 2007, 24)

To define religion or religious identity only ‘in terms of “strict” beliefs and practices leaves much of everyday religion unanalyzed’ as Ammerman points out. Therefore I invite the reader to observe religion more from a phenomenological perspective, which means that something becomes religious if it is understood to be religious by those

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<sup>28</sup> These might, however, be differently defined within the various Islamic movements and traditions (cf. Roald 2001, 22).

<sup>29</sup> Known in Arabic as *ahl al-kitab*, according to the Qur’an this includes Jews, Sabians and Christians.

<sup>30</sup> This conception is deduced to well-known hadith in an-Nawawi’s collection of forty hadiths and often interpreted in a different way within Sufi tradition (Roald 2001, 19 and 304).



who observe it or take part in it. This does not however exclude the possibility that the views of an observer and a participant could differ. (Ammerman 2007b, 224; cf. Ammerman 2003, 209) The women who have participated in this study – which examines the religiosities and identities of Albanian Muslim women in the present day Republic of Macedonia – have done so by virtue of the fact that they recognized themselves as belonging to the group which is its focus, when I told them about the aim of the study. This is to say that all of them considered themselves to be Muslims regardless of their – even religiously – different backgrounds and ways to believe. For example, for the members of *tarikats* strictly understood orthopraxis might have a less central significance. The question remains however: can this be considered as a declining element in their faith? Also, the ways in which everyday life intersects with opportunities to follow up religious duties in often non-Muslim environments and what among the duties are maybe more emphasized than others in a particular context, have an impact on how religious life is lived. Whether these elements have an influence on the degree of ‘Muslimness’ of the informants is a question that remains outside my sphere of judgement. One of the women I spoke to commented on this issue as she reflected upon her own religious practice:

*Aida: I I do [religious duties] in a daily basis, but I I I know that I don't do everything...*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Aida: It's it's fact that I really, it doesn't make me less Muslim [...] that somebody which aa, now how to say in English, this praying...*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: That they do in aa mosque...*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: I don't do that five times per day but [...] that doesn't make for me, personally that doesn't make me less Muslim than somebody else [...] that does [the practices] all the day and maybe lies.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: But I don't lie, I don't steal or I don't harm people [...] or aa so, there are things that I I don't do [...] and aa that I mean, that's it.*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

In Aida's view there were shifting emphases in an enacted religious identity. What was considered as meaningful and central for being a Muslim could have different interpretations. Aida thought that one could be a good Muslim by observing the moral guidelines such as not lying, stealing or harming other people, even though one did not necessarily observe all the religious duties *à la lettre*. In the interviews,

the Albanian Muslim women expressed their religious identities in different ways. They defined their religious identities in relation to societal circumstances and the different groups it comprised, the freedoms, rights and possibilities they as Muslims, women and Macedonian citizens had. Women acknowledged their religious identities, furthermore, in relation to different Islamic groups, Albanian cultural traditions and nationalism, generations, local contexts, gender and the perceptions that non-Muslims had of them. They also studied religious issues and visited different Islamic religious spaces, celebrated Islamic celebrations and rites of transition, made their religious conviction meaningful in a variety of human relationships, clothing, dietary restrictions, behaviour and through experiencing social responsibility. Islam was also significant in questions that were more related to the general values and attitudes towards life, such as the value of a human being, gratitude, believing in life in the Hereafter, having religious role models to look up to and being responsible.

While navigating through my many-faceted material and writing based on it, I have attempted to keep in mind something that Joy points out, as she argues that

*[t]here needs to be suspicion of all forms of enculturated ideals of identity which appeal to essences – be it of women, ‘femininity’, glorious pasts, ‘First World’, ‘Third World’, or any religious stereotypes that target difference as alien or defective.*  
(Joy 2006, 27)

In the following chapter, which describes the research context, the theoretical framework presented serves to structure and better understand the Macedonian context and the various identity developments embedded in it.

### 3 The Macedonian Context

NR: *Do you think that one can find various communities in [the] contemporary society?*

Zainab: *Yes.*

NR: *Hmh [nodding].*

Zainab: *Especially in Macedonia we, we are 'multi-culti'.*

NR: *Yeah [laughs].*

Zainab: *Multicultural [smiles] place, for example in that [this] room we are, I am Albanian, [pointing at other persons] Bosnian and Macedonian.*

NR: *Yeah.*

Interpreter: *And...*

NR: *And the Finnish.*

Zainab: *This is Macedonia [smiles].*

*(Zainab, 25 years old, city dweller)*

As this excerpt from one of my interviews aptly shows, the Republic of Macedonia is a mosaic of cultural features and groups. In this introduction to the research context I discuss the key elements related to the history writing and establishment of the contemporary Macedonian state; developments related to the formation of national and religious identities within its borders and Macedonian citizenship; and Islam's arrival and settlement in the Balkans and the Republic of Macedonia. The aim is to sketch a wider context within which the interviewees as Albanian, Muslim, women and Macedonian citizens can be located and observe more closely what these features might have meant for their identity construction (cf. Ammerman 2007b, 230–234). In the second part of the chapter I will present a more detailed description of the current Islamic presence in the Republic of Macedonia.

Macedonia is a region with a long history of human inhabitation and has a rich mythical tradition, which occasionally even intertwines with the 'actual history writing'. In the following sections of this chapter I will seek to highlight the most relevant points of Macedonian history for the contextualization of my interview material. I describe the role these aspects might play in the current societal circumstances pertaining to the Republic of Macedonia and its many-layered cultural heritage, as these features reflect also on Albanian women's identities. The sources regarding the issues related only to Muslim women or

Albanian Muslim women in the Republic of Macedonia are modest in number and those discussing the Islamization processes and the characteristics of Islam in the present day Republic of Macedonia are scarce. For these reasons this overview may in some points seem to discuss the more general aspects of the situation, though I have aimed to bring together its key elements.

## What Macedonia?

The definition of the geographical entity of Macedonia which we know today dates from the Treaty of Berlin of 1878. This entity is a 'conventional Macedonia', as no administrative or political division has ever been commensurate with territory limited this way. (Lory 1998, 15–16; cf. Rasku 2007, 134–135) This area of approximately 67,000 square kilometers was divided after the Balkan wars in 1913 between present-day Bulgaria (10,1% *Pirin Macedonia*), Greece (51,3% *Aegean Macedonia*) and the Republic of Macedonia (38,4% *Vardar Macedonia*). The small slice located in Albania (0,2%) is often not mentioned, but it may be perceptible in cartographic presentations (Lory 1998, 17; Poulton 2000, xiv and 1–2; Rasku 2007, 146; for maps see Appendix IV). These state borders are fully functional today, with the only difference that Vardar Macedonia is not part of Serbia/Yugoslavia anymore (cf. Lehti 1999b, 28; Lory 1996, 125). The territory of the Republic of Macedonia has for centuries been predominantly part of a larger entity – the Byzantine Empire: the Bulgarian and Serbian kingdoms of the Middle Ages, the Ottoman Empire for more than 500 years, after which it became a part of Serbia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS), royal and socialist Yugoslavias. Thus, its political tradition as a sovereign state is relatively fresh. In the course of history, the region of Macedonia has 'turned into a melting pot of ethnic groups and religions' (Rasku 2007, 137; cf. Karakasidou 1997, 219–220).

From an external point of view the Balkans as a somewhat peripheral European area might be thought of as religiously well-defined and clean-cut. This, however, is completely contrary to reality. The Balkans are located at the crossroads of several important cultural spheres (Saarikoski 1999, 11) and the peninsula is actually one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously complex areas in the whole world (Poulton 1991, 1). In drawing borders and making divisions, the Balkans have occupied a central position over a long historical period and also functioned as the staging ground of antagonisms between the

West and the East – Europe and Asia (Saarikoski 1999, 11). The region of Macedonia can be understood as the Balkans on a smaller scale, as Minna Rasku notes:

*Just like the Balkan area in a large sense, Macedonia is a border region between Muslims and Christians, Turks and Serbs, Slavic speakers and Greek speakers; historically a border of empires and nation-states, the Entente and the Central Powers, communism and Western democracies, modernity and tradition, stability and instability.*  
(Rasku 2007, 145)

Thus, Macedonia is an area where divisions and tensions between political actors, ideologies, stability and instability have manifested themselves, in addition to matters related to ethnic, linguistic and religious diversities (Laitila 1997, 46; cf. Rasku 2007, 137). It is also a culturally and historically multilayered site. Nevertheless, despite these mixed background variables, the ethnic and national homogenizations have characterized the developments in the region during the last hundred years (Lehti 1999b, 25).

## **Ottoman Macedonia – An Islamic Heritage with Historical Roots**

Macedonia became a part of the Ottoman Empire in 1371 (Laitila 1997, 51–52). It was one of the first territories in the Balkan Peninsula to be conquered by the Ottomans and became one of the last to be detached from the empire (1912–1913) (Poulton 1991, 46; Poulton 2000, 26). For the Albanian populations the Ottoman conquests meant being caught between Western and Eastern influences and alliances. Many revolts against Ottoman rule occurred in the mountainous lands where the Albanians lived. The empire's mountainous regions remained hard to govern and were reached with difficulty by the forces of political power. (Castellan 2002, 30, 33 and 34) In the pre-Ottoman Balkans the

Islamic presence had been modest (Popovic 2002, 1) and it was the Ottomans who introduced Islam to some of the former Yugoslavian regions (Popovic 1986a, 254).<sup>31</sup> The blossoming of Ottoman culture in the 16th century increased the number of conversions to Islam and the Balkan populations became confessionally more divided. At this period Albanians, who inhabited the regions of contemporary Albania and Kosovo, were mainly Catholics. (Lehti 1999a, 178) Islamization advanced relatively slowly in Albania and in the Western part of Macedonia, but reached these too in the 16th–18th centuries (Balivet 1992, 13).

As to the special character of Islamization in the Balkans, the role of the *dervishes* is often discussed. These dervishes, who belonged to the *tarikats* networks, were more or less heterodox, and it is argued that they would have facilitated the political grip the Ottomans had in the area. (Cf. Balivet 1992, 13) It is also claimed that the religious heritage of Islam that was spread by the dervishes influenced the character of religion and introduced syncretism and heterodoxy, which still could be perceived in the local beliefs and in the popular manifestations of the faith (Balivet 1992, 14). It has been suggested that the dervishes brought with them a form of an Islamic community that was well received in the Balkan area and offered an appealing social identity to the populations (cf. Minkov 2004, 92–109). However, it is difficult, due to the lack of reliable sources, to determine exhaustively the role that the dervishes had (Veinstein and Clayer 1996, 338). The sources describing the process of Islamization, are often incomplete and influenced by the ethnic or religious origins of the author or by the pseudo-historical myths, typically associated with the Balkan environment. Islamization seems, however, to have been stronger in the regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Vardar Macedonia than in other parts of the former Yugoslavian territory. The reasons for this Islamization may be various and context related, but Popovic considers that it was most probably mainly linked to the prevailing economic and social order in society which afforded Muslims access to a better economic and social status. (Popovic 1986a, 255–256) Minkov suggests that these factors of conversion could fall into three groups: economic, psychological-social and religious-cultural. In addition to Popovic's reflections, Minkov considers the impact of the allure of local Islamic institutions that strengthened the Muslim network in the whole soci-

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<sup>31</sup> Some parts of the former Yugoslavian territory, like Slovenia, and a large part of Dalmatia and Croatia, were never under the Ottoman rule, even though some of these territories underwent many raids during the 15th–17th centuries (Popovic 1986a, 254).

ety, as well as that of the preceding religious field (Bogomilism, Christianity, status of the Orthodox Church), hence the interaction between Muslim and Balkan popular culture, had. (Minkov 2004, 92)

The process of Islamization did not entirely exclude the earlier cultural layers and together these constructed a body of many-faceted beliefs. Doctrinally it was a very flexible Islamic tissue, capable of assimilating different features and giving these a new sense of coherence in relation to their original context. Out of all the regions of the Ottoman Empire it was in the Balkans that the Christian presence and influence remained dominant throughout the Islamization process. In other parts of the empire the Christians represented minorities. It is suggested that Islamization created a mixture of Islamic dogmas, local popular beliefs, and the mystical aspects of the Sufi brotherhoods and even of some elements that had a Central Asian origin, which the Turks would have introduced to the doctrine of Islam, when they embraced it. (Balivet 1992, 14; Norton 2001, 187) The *tarikats* were characteristic of the Ottoman society and they also had a perceptible profile in the Balkans (Popovic 2002, 4; Veinstein and Clayer 1996, 339–340). Background variables in the Islamization process were also to be found in the important linguistic and cultural mosaic of the region which characterized the region and made possible the birth of Muslim communities who were speakers of diverse mother tongues<sup>32</sup> (Balivet 1992, 14).

Alexandre Popovic distinguishes two phases in the Ottoman conquest of its territories and one other phenomenon, which was important in respect of the demographic landscape and formation of the Islamic communities in the Ottoman Empire. The first phase of conquest (from 1354 AD in the Balkans) was characterized by a more or less massive implantation of the military and administrative elements in the conquered regions. In the Macedonian territory this implantation was later reinforced by a sort of double colonisation realized by both the Turkic and the non-Turkic populations, among them Albanians and Circassians. These were originally from Asia Minor and from other southeastern European regions and both nomadic and sedentary by nature. During the second phase, the Islamization of the local

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<sup>32</sup> For example Slavic-speakers: Bosniaks speaking Bosnian as their mother tongue, Bulgarian-speaking Pomaks and Macedonian-speaking Torbešis, as well as Greek-speaking populations such as Vallahadès and Giritli and even those who spoke Spanish as their mother tongue, the Dönmes. The Dönmes were a population that originally had a Jewish background, but had converted to Islam. (Balivet 1992, 14)

populations, which had regional differences, started. (Popovic 1986a, 254–255)<sup>33</sup>

The third aspect to be noticed concerns the waves of migration (both immigration and emigration) that took place within the extent of the whole territory of Rumeli<sup>34</sup> and even across its borders (Popovic 1986a, 254). The Ottoman conquest put various population groups on the move (Castellan 1991, 116) and large numbers of Turkic-speaking, mainly Islamic settlers, arrived in Macedonia. Many in the Balkans adopted the religion of the new rulers, for example the Albanians and Roma, but also parts of Greek and Slavic-speaking populations. (Poulton 2000, 26) In the later history of the Ottoman Empire these migratory movements were often followed by the Empire's loss of territories (particularly since 1699), as the Muslim populations had a tendency to migrate from the conquered regions back to the empire. For the Macedonian territory, this meant for example the reception of Muslims from Montenegro and Bosnia (from 1878) in the 19th century. The possible impact these internal migrations had on the solidarity, or its opposite, of the different Muslim groups remains difficult to estimate (Popovic 1986a, 257).

Relative religious freedom reigned in the Ottoman Empire and the administration was based on a millet system, which divided the subjects according to their confession. Islam gained territory in the region of Bosnia, as well as among the Albanians. While converting or returning to Islam these Muslims had sometimes preserved some of the Christian traditions or had a double affiliation – a phenomenon known also as Crypto-Christianity (cf. Laitila 1996, 77). Due to these features religious differences in the Balkan context should not be considered as too sharp and differentiated from each other (Lehti 1999a, 179). One of the Albanian women interviewed, Zahra, reflected on Islam in relation to other religions, when I asked her about Prophet Muhammad's meaning as a role model for her:

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<sup>33</sup> Popovic notes that this colonisation was not so heavily imposed in the western parts of former Yugoslavia and particularly not in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Popovic 1986a, 255).

<sup>34</sup> The European part of the Ottoman Empire.



*Zahra: He was our last Prophet, we have in our religion what we have [...] aa I don't know, but I believe since this [is the] last religion [...] okay? It's pure, raised from the other, it absorbs from every other religion [...] the best [...] and aa we have this religion what we have today [...] so it's easy.  
(Zahra, 59 year old, village dweller)*

Thus Zahra, who had a mixed religious background could perceive the layers Islam as a religion absorbed its character from: the differences and similarities between different religious traditions, which also functioned as a source of her Muslim identity.

The arrival of Islam added a new element to the Balkan religious landscape, in which rivalries between different communities were not an unknown phenomenon (Duijzings 2000, 14). The Ottoman millet system tied the populations more firmly to their faith or religious group rather than to the state and a single pervasive culture. The system was often based on local arrangements and it allowed millets to have their own internal structures, hierarchies and educational systems. However, all religious communities were not treated on an equal footing, despite being recognized the non-Muslim communities remained subordinated (Duijzings 2000, 28). Millets were like kinds of corporate bodies and the Ottoman authorities tended to deal rather with their leaders than with individual members (Poulton 2000, 36 and 45). Regarding the impact this had on identity construction Hugh Poulton suggests that '[t]hus the religious community – the millet – was the prime focus of identity outside the family and locality' (Poulton 2000, 36; cf Jezernik 2004, 180).

During the Ottoman rule Macedonian territory was divided into administrative units with changing borders. These Macedonian provinces transformed mostly into poor, forgotten countryside that did not carry much of importance (Castellan 1991, 350; Lehti 1999b, 26). Anastasia Karakasidou however underlines the meaning that the region of Macedonia had as a transit route and region's 'sizeable fertile lands' (Karakasidou 1997, 218–219). Geographically Macedonia was difficult to access and its economy was relatively modest. Thus, it was not the wealth of Macedonia, but its strategic position that later made the neighbouring states strive for its possession (Castellan 1991,

351).<sup>35</sup> National ideologies developed earlier in the emerging states of Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria than in other parts of the empire. The strivings of these three, often justified by historical rights to territory, to determinate their national borders, converged in the region of Macedonia, which was situated at the crossroads of these kingdoms. (Lehti 1999b, 26)

Albanians who became Muslims had opportunities to gain important posts within the Ottoman administrative structure, and of all the Balkan populations they were predominant in their distribution (Castellan 2002, 35–36). The official Ottoman language was a mixture of Turkish, Arabic and Persian and it was a difficult language to master and one of the reasons why the majority of the Empire's population was excluded from power and 'higher' culture. The populations often followed their own local, fragmented and uncodified majority folk cultures, when the culture of state elite tended to be shared by some privileged minorities. (Cf. Poulton 2000, 32 and 45) The corporations and trade guilds of the artisans, known as *esnafs* or *rufets*, offered locally placed identification, which also had a political role (Castellan 2002, 37). The difficult geographical communications furthered the formation of communities that 'tended to be compartmentalised rather than unified' (Poulton 2000, 31).

## National Awakenings

The formation of modern nations in the Balkan area had a great deal to do with wider diplomatic developments and changing alliances in Europe and Asia, which influenced the balance of power (Karakasiidou 1997, 77). Albanian national awakening (known also as the Albanian National Renaissance, in Albanian *rilindja*) emerged in the 1830s–40s and was quite similar to the other national movements in the region (Misha 2002, 33), as all of them were formed when the Ottoman Empire started to withdraw from the Balkans, for the benefit of the new Balkan states and of some of the Great Powers (Clayer 2007, 707). Some suggest that the Albanians were among the last to follow the nationalist passions and ambitions that were 'combined with the intrigues and interest of politics of the European Great Powers' (Misha 2002, 34). Clayer, however, argues that Albanian nationalism was

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<sup>35</sup> The Macedonian region controlled the traditional routes from the Danube to the Aegean Sea through the river valleys. The old Via Egnatia and the important harbour of Thessaloniki also increased attractiveness of the region. (Castellan 1991, 351)

not delayed in relation to others, but its diffusion was slowed down, due to the weak level of education and the illiteracy of people, limited economic development resulting from the insufficient communication networks and a lack of state that would have generated nationalism in the framework of state-building. (Clayer 2007, 707; cf. Castellan 1991, 346)

According to Piro Misha the delay in nation-building has played an important role in the history of Albanians through out the 19th and the 20th centuries. The aspects that slowed down the emergence of Albanian nationalism were, for example, a lack of a single administrative, economic, cultural and even religious centre, in addition to which the Ottoman administration did not facilitate the Albanians' access to education in their own language. A factor that differentiated the process of Albanian nation-building and self-definition from others was also that it has been understood as emerging from an outside threat, both from the side of the neighbouring states and people. Also the effect the dissolution and collapse of the Ottoman Empire had influenced its development. (Clayer 2007, 717; Misha 2002, 34 and 37–39) The process of Albanian nation-building could also be perceived as a product of political developments within the empire, but, however, not a threat in itself to its preservation (Clayer 2007, 717) The development of Albanian nationalism was linked to border questions, to the Macedonian question, to the reforms and state's political functioning as well as to the emergence of the new elites formed along the new educational lines. (Clayer 2007, 709; cf. Misha 2002, 37–39) Local elites could use Enlightenment ideas to create popular mobilization and armed insurrection. Their ideologies were often essentialist and rhetoric:

*They stressed the innate and primordial characteristics of one's own national group while 'Orientalizing' those of others. The rhetorical debate in this contest focused on the progressive capacities of each national group, creating new ideological hierarchies of identity in which some national groups were deemed more worthy of European support than others.*  
(Karakasidou, 1997, 77–78)

In the Balkans, writers influenced by the Enlightenment prepared the ideological ground for emancipation and liberation from the Ottoman power. They also set the circumstances that led to the emergence of 'new partisan constructs of identity, solidarity, and difference that encouraged separation and stigmatization' between different groups of people. (Karakasidou 1997, 78) The spread of the idea of national iden-

tities into Macedonian territory commenced in a more definite manner in the 1890s (Lehti 1999b, 35). Attempts to build identities on other than a religious basis started among the Muslims at the end of the nineteenth century (Duijzings 2000, 28). Religion played a central role in the national competition over the Ottoman Macedonia and 'popular conceptions of identity had a strong religious element, shaped in large part by the administrative institutions of the millet system' (Karakasidou 1997, 108). The period often known as Macedonian struggle is placed between the years 1903–1908. During this time religion and education gave in the form of institutions frame 'for the promulgation of enlightenment ideologies of national identity and liberation' (Karakasidou 1997, 108). The decades preceding the Macedonian conflict and the armed confrontations related to it are described by Karakasidou as 'characterized largely by a propaganda war between Greece and Bulgaria (as well as between Greece and Serbia) for the "hearts and minds" of the Slavic-speakers of Macedonia' (Karakasidou 1997, 78). The loosening of the Ottoman grip over the Macedonian province increased the chaos (Lehti 1999b, 35) and the Macedonian territory mutated into a 'scholarly battle field' between the Bulgarian, Greek, Serbian and even Vlah (Aromanian) school establishments. The consequences of these tensions and various strivings aiming at own benefit transformed into a half century of religious and scholarly battles, as well as propaganda that mobilized history, linguistics and ethnography and could be read in the contradictory statistics and opinions of a variety of experts on the issue. (Castellan 1991, 351 and 354; Jezernik 2004, 173 and 182) This increasing influence of nationalist ideologies led to unstable circumstances and war, and Macedonia turned into an enclosure of terrorism (Castellan 1991, 355–356).

The situation following the Balkan Wars in 1913 did not give any realistic chances for the creation of an independent Macedonia and the ethnic homogenization of the Macedonian territory, known at that time as *South Serbia*, started in the unity of Serbia (Lehti 1999b, 36). From 1913 to 1918 Vardar Macedonia was theoretically a part of the Kingdom of Serbia, but underwent three years of Bulgarian occupation (1915–1918) during the First World War (Lory 1998, 19). Serbian

rule issued new laws on the status of Muslims in Vardar Macedonia, which had a significant Muslim population. The Muslim community was very heterogeneous and consisted of different Slavic populations, Turks, Albanians, Roma as well as Muslims who had emigrated from Bosnia. The arrival of the Serbian army in 1918 into Vardar Macedonian territory was followed by a large number of departures to Turkey – a phenomenon that has continued until recent times. (Popovic 1986a, 308–309; Popovic 1996, 381–382)

After the First World War, most of the Balkan territories that were a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and inhabited by the Southern Slavs were annexed to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – the SHS (Lehti 1999a, 181). In the SHS, the creation of ‘one nation’, which spoke three Slavic dialects and had three religions: Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and Islam, was an ideological, national and romantic ideal (Laitila 1997, 149). Teuvo Laitila however suggests that the motivations for establishing the state were more based on resistance to Austria-Hungary or expansionist strivings, which were at that point realizable at the expense of the Ottoman Empire (Laitila 1997, 149). The new state had a heterogeneous legal system, due to the different historical developments the different regions had gone through. *Sharia* courts were retained for matters that regarded Muslims in questions of family and inheritance law (EWIC 2005, 370). Gëzim Krasniqi argues that due to the state’s policy, which recognized only the religious differences, Muslims, as remnants of the disliked Ottoman Empire, were motivated to migrate to Turkey and the remaining Muslim population was encouraged to emphasize their religious identity over nationhood as the most important aspect of their group identity. (Krasniqi 2010, 6) However, also other groups than the Muslims experienced this state’s policy of uniting ‘Yugoslavism’ as oppressive.

From 1929 onwards, the southern Slavic state was known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and it officially recognized six religious communities: the Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical and Reformed Churches as well as Muslim and Jewish communities, (cf. Laitila 2011, 67; Lehti 1999a, 181). The idea had been to create an equal union of the southern Slavs, but the new state seemed to have a relatively centralized

nature. Political assassinations and continuous, violent rebellion were typical symptoms of the new cycle of violence that was about to be unleashed. (Lehti 1999a, 182) During the early years of Royal Yugoslavia, Macedonian territory was very strongly Serbisized (Lory 1996, 35–36).<sup>36</sup> Encountering with politics of ethnic homogenization was, most likely, challenging for the important Albanian minority, who were neither of the two, not Slavs or Orthodox, and in that sense they fractured ethnic unity (Lehti 1999a, 181; Lehti 1999b, 38).

Krasniqi suggests that for Albanian-speaking Muslims the period of the Royal Yugoslavia gave them the status of being a double minority: both linguistic and ethnic. They were living under the south Slavic state's administration and religiously led by the Bosnian Muslims, who frequently replaced the Islamic scholars who had taught in Albanian language. (Krasniqi 2010, 7) The formalized Islam preached and practiced by the imams from the Hanafi Islamic schools of Sarajevo was promoted by the religious authorities. Authorities positioned themselves negatively towards Sufi lodges, missionaries and *tekkes*, which were particularly present in Kosovo and Macedonia, as these were perceived as places for illegal education in the Albanian language and as repositories of Albanian nationalism. Despite attempts to create loyal Muslim citizens with de-Albanized religious awareness in the regions of Kosovo and Macedonia, Krasniqi claims that for the Albanians religion was not the main marker of identity in this period. Instead, despite their everyday religious practices and nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire, they distinguished themselves on the basis of language and ethnicity. Thus, there seems to have been a lack of common identity, based on shared religious bonds among the Slavic and non-Slavic Muslims in the Royal Yugoslavia (Krasniqi 2010, 7–8; cf. Duijzings 2002, 67).

Royal Yugoslavia became involved in the Second World War in 1941 and it surrendered swiftly to the axis powers (Laitila 1997, 186–187). Bulgaria, allied to the axis states, occupied most of Vardar Macedonia from 1941–1944 and the imposed cultural influence changed from Serbian to a Bulgarian one (Lory 1996, 35–36; Lory 1998, 19). During the war, western parts of Vardar Macedonia and the region of Kosovo

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<sup>36</sup> The Bulgarian schools in the Macedonian territory were closed and the Serbian language gained a dominant position. Serbian was imposed not only through the school system, but also through church and civil status – i.e. the change of names. (Lory 1998, 19; Jezernik 2004, 184–186) All Orthodox Slavs in the kingdom were considered to be Serbs (Lehti 1999b, 37–38; Lory 1998, 19).

were annexed to Albania, which from 1939 was allied to Italy (Laitila 1997, 187). This 'Greater Albania' endured until 1944, when it ceased to exist (cf. Castellan 2002, 88). It can be observed here, as Bernard Lory points out, that the feelings shared by many Balkan states related to their broader territorial ambitions are marked by bitterness, as these have all been degraded in the course of history (Lory 1998, 21; Jezernik 2004, 170).

## **The Socialist Republic of Macedonia<sup>37</sup> (1946–1991) – Socialism and Religious Life**

After the Second World War, the national antagonisms that had torn apart the Balkan peninsula since the 19th century became, initially, less pronounced due to the ideological influence of communism (Lory 1996, 4). The new Yugoslavia did not want to repeat the administrative mistakes of the first one and it became a federation composed of six republics<sup>38</sup> (Castellan 1991, 511; Lehti 1999a, 182). The establishment of a constituent republic within Yugoslavia in 1946, gave a political framework to the Macedonian national identity and supported the emergence of a more clearly defined Macedonianity (Brunnbauer 2002, 9; Lehti 1999b, 38; Lory 1998, 20; Rasku 2007, 132; Thiessen 2007, 17) as the status of a republic meant that in principle it would need to have its own language, nationality and history. (Lehti 1999b, 38–39) The use of three languages – Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian and Macedonian – considered to be the predominant ones, was officially recognized in the new Yugoslavia. In the autonomous provinces the Albanian and Hungarian languages respectively had legal status. (Castellan 1991, 511) Religion and state were separated from each other, the activities of the religious communities limited and the real properties of the religious communities nationalized (Laitila 2011, 67).

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was the least homogenous of all the European countries and had a three-tier system of national rights given to different nations within its borders. In this system the first group consisted of the *nations of Yugoslavia*, which by

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<sup>37</sup> The republic changed its name several times; this name was taken in use in 1963 (see e.g. Rasku 2007, 29).

<sup>38</sup> Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. There were also two autonomous provinces; Vojvodina, which had a very mixed population including amongst others Hungarians, Romanians, Serbs, Croats, Slovaks and Ukrainians; and Kosovo with major Albanian population.

the end of socialist period numbered six: the Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Muslims<sup>39</sup>, Serbs and Slovenes. The second group included ten nationalities of Yugoslavia, which possessed a variety of linguistic and cultural rights. The largest communities in this group were the Albanians and Hungarians.<sup>40</sup> The third group consisted of *other nationalities and ethnic groups* including people classifying themselves as Yugoslavs. (Poulton 1991, 5)<sup>41</sup> Thus, the Albanians were recognized as a nationality, and not as a nation, as one nation could not have two 'states' and there was already the sovereign state of Albania, founded in 1912 (Brown 2000, 128). The Albanians enjoyed certain cultural and educational rights, and in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia there were Albanian schools, a newspaper, television and radio programmes, as well as different kinds of cultural associations and sports clubs (Lehti 1999a, 182; Poulton 1991, 77). Despite this superficially balanced picture the reality was infused with tensions (Poulton 1991, 77). In the three-tier system of national rights Albanian nationalism was able to develop from the late 1960s in the areas of Albanian schooling system and political representation. Recognized by the Yugoslavian state, Albanian national identity entered into a certain competition with other nations and nationalities. (Clayer 2007, 720)

The anti-religious attitude had a place in the socialist administration and legislation. In 1945 a state wide bureau of religious affairs was tasked with regulating relations between the state and the various religious groups. State and religion were officially separated in 1946. Since then religious beliefs concerned the private citizen. (Laitila 2004, 52) During this period the 'pragmatic coexistence between Islam and the communist ideology of the state' was the reality within which '[a] Muslim's duties and obligations as a citizen of the religiously diverse state had to take precedence over those of the Islamic community' (Bringa 1995, 199–200; cf. Laitila 2004, 52) Sharia courts were abolished in 1946 and *mektebs* in 1952. The use of the Islamic veil was prohibited in 1950 and the prohibition was negatively received in

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<sup>39</sup> Recognized as a nation with this name in 1971 and known currently as Bosniaks.

<sup>40</sup> The other groups defined as nationalities were Bulgarians, Czechs, Roma, Italians, Romanians, Ruthenians, Slovaks and Turks (Poulton 1991, 5).

<sup>41</sup> In this category were also e.g. Austrians, Greeks, Jews, Germans, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians and Vlachs (Poulton 1991, 5).



the highly traditional Macedonian society.<sup>42</sup> Most Islamic religious schools were closed and religious education was preserved only in the mosques and removed from the state schools. Numerous mosques were nonetheless built during the socialist period with important foreign economic support. The social security of the religious officials also improved and circumcision and *hifz* remained actively practiced. Pilgrimage became a more widespread practice after 1961, when the authorities abolished the restriction on the quota of participants. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 30; Clayer 2001, 184; Laitila 2004, 52; Popovic 1986a, 348 and 351)

After the rupture with the Soviet Union in 1948, Yugoslavian alignment reconfigured towards religiously more liberal (Popovic 1986a, 352–353). However, until the end of the 1950s the politics practised *vis-à-vis* the Muslim populations followed in many ways the Stalinist model in regard to both religious and national issues. This alignment was aimed at bringing about an integration of the populations into the socialist order by means of giving to them cultural rights and by secularizing them. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 30) Emigration to Turkey continued in several waves, and it is estimated that from 1950 onwards over 100,000 people left Yugoslavia. The emigrants were mainly Turks, Albanians, Muslims from Sandžak and Macedonian Roma who declared themselves to be Turks. The authorities encouraged this and there was an agreement between Yugoslavia and Turkey on the issue. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 30; Popovic 1986a, 346; cf. Krasniqi 2010, 7–8) New socialist legislation administratively divided the state into four Muslim communities: 1) Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia, 2) Serbia (including Vojvodina and Kosovo), 3) the Socialist Republic of Macedonia and 4) Montenegro (Popovic 1986a, 347). Most of the Muslims in the regions of Kosovo and Vardar Macedonia were Albanian-speakers (Popovic 2002, 11). All these units were under the authority of *reis-ul-ulema* of the Muslim community of Yugoslavia, located in Sarajevo (Popovic 1986a, 347) and were functional mainly under the Bosnian Muslims (Krasniqi 2010, 8).

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<sup>42</sup> Removing the veils of the Muslim women in the Balkan area was a long process that had already started in 1878 and led to wide-ranging reactions for and against it on the parts of both men and women. The shift from one appearance to another was 'accompanied by adverse feelings, including confusion, disorientation, and the sense of being exposed to external pressure – these were particularly marked among the uneducated rural female population' (EWIC 2005, 632–633).

Popovic suggests that the dynamically developed religious liberalism *à la yougoslave*, when it tangled with problems of local nationalist ideologies and economic problems, as well as rapidly increasing class differences, supported the religious revival, as religion remained 'the only legal' recourse to an affirmation of the force and aspirations of the local nationalisms. (Popovic 1986a, 353) This revival did not, however, concern all the Muslim groups or all Yugoslavian regions (Popovic 1986a, 366), but it was acknowledged abroad (Popovic 1986a, 354; Clayer 2007, 721). The circumstances in Yugoslavia were not overly monolithic. In the highly traditional and patriarchal Vardar Macedonia, Islam tended to resist the political developments, which Clayer calls 'the promotion of the materialist and atheist values' within society. One sign of resistance was the continuously relatively high number of pilgrims who left for *hajj*. (Clayer 2001, 184) The status of Albanians became an issue in the 1960s–1970s in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, where they formed about one fifth of the republic's population. Albanians created underground organisations, as in Kosovo, but the Yugoslavian state refused to consider the possibility of establishing an Albanian republic, or recognizing the Albanians as a constitutional nation. This was motivated by the state's politics which saw Albanians as a nationality, the majority of which was resident outside the Yugoslavian borders. This distancing approach as to the Albanian attempts to gain more autonomy led into new conflicts after Tito's death in 1980. (Laitila 1997, 231–232)

In the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, the Macedonian Slavic population had a considerably higher representation in the League of Communists than what was their proportion of the population (Poulton 1991, 78). The new federal constitution ratified in 1974, gave the Albanians a chance to boost their status inside the political and administrative institutions. Furthermore, a new Albanian elite was educated in the Albanian-speaking university, founded in Prishtina (in Kosovo) in 1970. These developments favoured the emergence of nationalist currents among the Muslim populations. In parallel, the quite remarkable political liberty given to the Islamic institutions made possible their instrumentalization by the state. These aspects were beneficial, for example, when state's relations with the non-aligned countries and the state's opposition to the Albanian nationalism in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia were concerned. Hence, the Muslim community underwent a sort of revival and strengthened its relations with the wider Muslim world. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 32)

The constitution of 1974 gave more independence to the republics and autonomous provinces. This did not, however, solve the problems posed by the diverse national groups, but rather tended even to create new ones. (Lehti 1999a, 182) The events of 1981 in Kosovo also led to manifestations of nationalism among the Albanians in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. This worried the Macedonian authorities and their responses to Albanian nationalism and irredentism showed a great severity. These actions were directed towards Albanian literature, for instance, as well as music, names, sales of property and illegal groups. It meant also the dismissal of Albanian officials from the state administration, measures taken against schooling in Albanian and an amendment of the law on religious teaching. This campaign against Albanian nationalism, known as 'differentiation', escalated and provoked probably the greatest opposition in the field of education and language rights. (Poulton 1991, 78–83) The measures were taken also against 'Albanization' of the Muslim community (CEDIME-SE 2000, 9). Thus, despite the high communist ideals of brotherhood and unity there was increasing alienation and mistrust between the Macedonian and the Albanian communities in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, which manifested itself in the everyday relations and attitudes (Poulton 1991, 84).

For several decades the Muslim community in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia received Muslim Albanian-speakers from Kosovo (Popovic 1986a, 359). A *medrese* was re-opened<sup>43</sup> in Skopje in 1984 and this was according to one of my reference persons exceptional for the period. The medrese served to educate people, who worked in the mosque communities in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia and later on in the Republic of Macedonia (interview 10). Towards the end of the socialist period, the wealthy Arab countries and developments in the Islamic world as a whole exerted an influence on the Balkans and Balkan Muslims (Popovic 1986a, 366). Tensions increased in Yugoslavia when in 1989 Serbia annulled the autonomous statuses of Kosovo and Vojvodina (Lehti 1999a, 183). Poulton estimates that one reason for the lack of major inter-ethnic incidents in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia was that a relaxation of political constraints had allowed the ethnic Albanians to organize openly (Poulton 1991, 85). Even though it seems that the half century of Titoist communist rule ended up disintegrating in its own impossibility, making a way for the

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<sup>43</sup> This medrese was established in 1440 and has been destroyed many times. It had stopped functioning in 1941 (Zekaj 2002, 83–85).

triumphant and rapid Westernisation, communism can also be considered as the major mediator of the Westernization of the Balkans. This Westernization could be discerned in a wide variety of political choices made, the pronounced importance given to productivity and the existence of a mass culture. (Cf. Lory 1996, 117) Communist influence also opposed traditional land ownership and religious practice and developed the educational system, and hence, thus moving the state in the direction of modernization (cf. de Rapper 2002, 198). The primacy of economic development even sometimes affected brutally the traditional Balkan culture (Lory 1996, 117).

The communist era meant remarkable changes in society demographically, economically and sociologically and during this period questions about the national identities of the various Muslim groups started to crystallize (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 30). The numbers of Muslims also increased in relation to the Christian populations. This development was slowed down in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia as a result of waves of emigration among the Muslims. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 32–33) Between 1944 and 1989–1990, at least some portions of the traditional elites disappeared from the society due to the collectivisation of the land and the damage caused to the religious institutions. Efforts made to integrate Muslim populations into the socialist modernisation process led to their accelerated secularization. Illiteracy was reduced remarkably and new political, technical and economic elites were formed. A real rural exodus took place. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 33) Thiessen thinks that socialism meant revolutionary changes in social relations and especially gender relations (Thiessen 2010, 44). Sabrina Ramet, however, states that even though gender equality was a part of the Yugoslavian socialist programme, there continuously seemed to be more important issues to solve and developments in this field had to wait (Ramet 1999a, 6; Ramet 1999b, 100–101; cf. EWIC 2007b, 35).<sup>44</sup> Equality was understood as class equality, which did not recognize gender differences. Thus, '[i]n practice, women's exercise of their constitutional and legal rights was constrained by the influence of the patriarchal culture' (EWIC 2007a, 29), and men played a leading role in political and economic life and also enjoyed more high status salaries and positions of work (EWIC 2007a, 29–30). Andrei Simić considers, however, that this patriarchal feature was

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<sup>44</sup> Feminism was considered at that time as a rather bourgeois term and was therefore not in line with the socialist ideology (Ramet 1999a, 5). Also, gender inequality was explained in terms of primitivism, religious beliefs and other conservative prejudices instead of seeing it as a question of class (Ramet 1999b, 101).

rather a public than a private fact and that women did have at least some affectual power. He sees this as a certain kind of cryptomatriarchy. The power or status of women was often legitimized by virtue of their becoming mothers, but also by women's ages or by their giving birth to sons, or their upbringing of the children. (Simić 1999, 12–14) In Yugoslavia women and men had different life trajectories and women's authority tended to increase with years. This development was, however, tied to the life cycle of each family, with its particular characteristics and the various roles that the family members had during its course. (Simić 1999, 21) However, the influence of traditional gender roles linked to the patriarchal order was perpetuated through modernization, industrialization and urbanization (EWIC 2007b, 35).

Krasniqi believes that Yugoslavia's policy towards Albanian Muslims had a negative and fracturing impact on the fabric of Albanian society and that it harmed the long tradition of religious syncretism among Albanians, which was mainly practised by the tarikat networks. This was due to the attempts to mainstream Islam and had an impact on the homogenization of the Albanian population in terms of religion. In the 1990s almost 90% of Albanians were Sunni Muslims in Kosovo and in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, Catholics had shrunk to 4–5% while few Albanian Orthodox Christians remained. In the first and second Yugoslavia, the religious identity of the Albanians was repeatedly redefined in relation to wider political developments in the country. Despite efforts to create an Islamic religious identity that would replace ethnicity, the Albanians preserved the importance of national identity and consciousness. Religion, however, remained an important factor of self-identification for the Albanians and in a sense also functioned as an affirmation of their otherness *vis-à-vis* Orthodox Macedonians in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. (Krasniqi 2010, 9–10)

These factors can explain the various developments in the Macedonian religious field from a wider, sequential and historical perspective and help to understand it. My aim is not to draw impermeable borders between the various cultures, religions, people and identities, but instead observe these from an angle from which together they form an

interesting and many-sided organic cultural tissue that spreads over the Republic of Macedonia, and the Balkans.

## The Republic of Macedonia Today

In order to come to a better understanding of the Islamic religiosity of Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia, one would need to take a closer look at the mosaic of the contemporary social contexts and the whole society. In this section I discuss briefly the political position of the Macedonian state, and political developments in relation to the most important questions of social preoccupation in Macedonian society. This overview includes political, economic, social and cultural features linked to the societal processes, which may have an impact on the Albanian women's construction of identity.

The declaration of independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 made it one of the successor states (of which there are currently altogether seven) of the Socialist Yugoslavia. The developments that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia varied in the different Yugoslavian republics. In the Macedonian case the declaration did not lead to war, but to an internationally difficult situation. (Lory 1996, 166; cf. Thiessen 2010, 42) The secession was a result of a referendum following which the Republic of Macedonia declared independence on December 19, 1991. The state was recognized by the United Nations and accepted as a member in 1993, without an official flag and with the provisional name of the *Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*<sup>45</sup>, instead of the constitutional name *the Republic of Macedonia*. (Lory 1996, 168; Thiessen 2007, 23 and 27<sup>46</sup>) The independence of the state involved a nation-building process, which had already begun in the 1980s and intensified after 1991. Krasniqi sees in this development traits of national homogenization. (Krasniqi 2010, 24) Also Ulf Brunnbauer considers that state policies seemed to aim at fostering particularly a Macedonian national identity (Brunnbauer 2002, 10). The new Macedonianity was not defined only by means of the borders of the former socialist republic, but also in relation to the historical Macedonia (Lehti 1999b, 39; cf. Georgievski 2009; Rasku 2007).

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<sup>45</sup> Also the form *the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* is used.

<sup>46</sup> See for example OSCE 2011a and 2011b.

The unfavourable attitudes of neighbouring countries did not make the new state's first steps into independence easy (Lory 1996, 168) and during the entire period of its existence it has seemed to be squeezed from all sides due to a variety of, mainly political, reasons. The name issue is one of the factors that still continues to strain the diplomatic relationship the country has with Greece (see e.g. Poulton 2000, 177; Rasku 2007, 130–147).<sup>47</sup> The embargos declared by Serbia and Greece shortly after independence 'severely damaged Macedonia's economy and disrupted privatization' (Friedman 1997, 1444; cf. Lory 1996, 168). The affect was most likely strengthened by the delay in the European Union's recognition of the Macedonian state (Suvilehto 1999, 147). Because the language-related institutions of the country were often government subsidized, it could be assumed that the economic situation had 'a direct impact also on the language policy and subsequently on inter-ethnic relations' (Friedman 1997, 1444). The Macedonian state was internationally protected from being involved in the Yugoslavian civil war. The international community guaranteed the country's external security and co-ordinated internal reforms and economic transformation. The country also pursued a policy of disarmament, conflict avoidance and international co-operation. (Thiessen 2007, 24–25)

The population of the Republic of Macedonia comprises a mixture of ethnic and religious groups. In 2002 out of the 2,022,547<sup>48</sup> inhabitants about 64.18% spoke Macedonian<sup>49</sup> as their mother tongue and 25.17% were Albanian-speaking. The majority of the Albanian speakers are speakers of Geg (a North Albanian dialect variant), but a Tosk-speaking (a South Albanian dialect) minority also exists (Friedman 1997, 1445). Other languages represented and acknowledged in the census of 2002<sup>50</sup> were Turkish, Serbian, Romani, Vlach and Bosnian.<sup>51</sup> Two alphabets are a part of the country's everyday life, as the Macedonian language uses the Cyrillic alphabet and most of the other linguistic groups use the Latin one. Furthermore, as Victor Friedman observes, 'Macedonia is at the heart of the Balkan contact zone and

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<sup>47</sup> For more details concerning the relationship with Greece see e.g. Frckoski 2009, Rasku 2007, Rasku 2011, Poulton 2000 and 1991.

<sup>48</sup> The population estimate in 2011 was 2,058,539 (State Statistical Office's website, accessed 16 October 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Referring here to the South Slavic language.

<sup>50</sup> There are divergent opinions about the accuracy of this census, for instance when it comes to the number of Albanian-speaking inhabitants and the visibility of all the minorities.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. State Statistical office d, 34.

[...] multilingualism has been a fact of everyday life for many people for centuries' (Friedman 1997, 1447). The linguistic variety overlaps the religious one: 64.78% of the people are Orthodox Christians and 33.33% Muslims. A small number of Christians belong to Catholic and Protestant churches.<sup>52</sup> Altogether the country has 18 registered religious communities.

The Republic of Macedonia is a parliamentary democracy struggling to improve and fortify its societal structure in relatively demanding circumstances. These have included the occasionally tense, politically tinged relationships with most of the neighbouring countries (cf. for example Tamminen 2011a; Iseni 2007a, 23–24). The country differs from the other former Yugoslav republics and post-communist states in that it has retained a number of social laws from its socialist era, while changing to a market economy. Also, its politics have turned away from the socialist past in a less accentuated manner. (Thiesen 2007, 25) The economic situation has slightly improved in recent years, but the country's gross national income per capita, US\$ 9,400 (est. in 2010), ranks among the weakest in Europe, alongside Albania and the Republic of Kosovo (CIA 2011a). These figures do not take into account the impact of the grey economy and the remittances sent from abroad by family members living in the diaspora, which influence the situation (CIA 2011b). The often primordial remittances and the networks of extended families living abroad can also offer a strong support for group solidarity (cf. Duijzings 2000, 6; Simić 1999, 15–16). Also criminality of different varieties (related to e.g. illegal drugs) has rooted in the Republic of Macedonia, one reason for this might be the economically difficult situation which may encourage finding alternative ways of survival (CIA 2011b). The proportionally modest result the Macedonian state has achieved in the collection of taxes weakens its administrative structure (Field diary).

In 2010, the unemployment rate for women in the country was 40.1% and women represented 64.5% of the inactive population. Of the total labour force, women comprised 39.4% and of the employed persons they represented 39.1% (State Statistical Office a). About 31.1% of the Macedonian population lives below the poverty line; a number that

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<sup>52</sup> Catholics 0.35%, Protestants, 0.03% and other 1.52% in census 2002 (State Statistical Office b, 335). After the disaster of the Second World War the Jewish community has also slightly increased and the Skopje-based Jewish community consists nowadays of about 250 members. There are other religious groups as well, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and groups with Hindu backgrounds. (Field diary)



slightly increased in 2009, halting the modest downward trend in poverty that had been the rule for some years (State Statistical Office c, 54). The poverty rate has, however, been relatively stable during the whole period of transition since 1991 (Stambolieva 2009) and households with many members are in a particularly vulnerable position. Of the poor people 53.7% live in households of five or more members. The poverty rate for the unemployed is 40.5% and in 2010 of all of the people living in poverty 42.7% were unemployed. (State Statistical Office c, 54) The important poverty rate can be a motive for searching for employment elsewhere. However, visa restrictions complicate any opportunities there may be to work abroad and strive for better economic status.

Estimations of the impact that the financial crisis inaugurated in 2008 have been less positive in the Balkan area (Le Courier des Balkans 2009b). Savka Todorovska points out that changes, which occurred during the period of transition have reflected negatively on the economic situation of the women, their employment and evaluation of their work (cf. Bracewell 1996). Women's work ability rate is lower (42.9%) than men's (67.3%). Also, they have difficulties in accessing state subsidies, because only 2% of them have land ownership in the rural areas, 4% have financial savings and 5% ownership of a place of residence. There is also a certain segregation of work positions, which often means that predominantly women work in modestly paid and unpopular positions in the public administration. (Todorovska 2009)

The political situation of the Republic of Macedonia has both internal and external dimensions. Neighbouring Greece's positioning *vis-à-vis* the country has led to tensions in diplomatic relationships, as Greece tends to see the Macedonian state as a potential threat to its integrity. The arguments on the Greek side concerning the Republic of Macedonia's national emblems and symbols, even the official name of the state, have been justified by the claims that the use of the name

*Macedonia* refers to expansionist designs.<sup>53</sup> (Brown 2000, 122–123; Lory 1996, 156–157; Rasku 2007) In addition, questions related to the Hellenic heritage of Macedonia have been raised during the course of these disagreements (International Crisis Group 2009; cf. Brown 2000; Rasku 2007).<sup>54</sup>

Between Sofia and Skopje the relationship has been strained particularly on the question of language, but it has also been intervoven with opinions concerning the rights of the Bulgarian and Macedonian minorities, and their very existence, on both sides of the border, as well as disagreements on historical issues. (International Crisis Group 2009; Ivanov et al. 2007/2008; Poulton 2000, 116 and 214–215). Tensions between Albania and the Republic of Macedonia have been linked to the significant Albanian minority (Andonovski 1998, 70–71) and the ‘Albanian question’ has been seen as being located ‘at the heart’ of the new Macedonian state. The Republic of Macedonia’s official symbols, the language, the church and the history, all refer to the state’s Slavic community, and therefore they tend to exclude other groups with different cultural backgrounds (Lehti 1999b, 39–40). The position of the Albanians in the post-1991 Macedonian state has been experienced as weakened and Albanians have felt insecurity regarding both national and religious identity, which differ from those of the majority population (Krasniqi 2010, 25). In coordination with Montenegro, the Macedonian government recognized the Republic of Kosovo in 2008 (Government of the Republic of Macedonia 2008), an act that could have had politically destabilizing repercussions in the region, but most likely was well received by Albanians. The Republic of Macedonia entered the Schengen area in December 2009 and this was a partial end of the state’s ‘incarceration’, which resulted from visa restrictions.

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<sup>53</sup> Ethnically and politically the concept ‘Macedonian’ refers to the Slavic-speaking population as a nationality or an ethnic group, and to all the Republic of Macedonia’s inhabitants in terms of citizenship (Andonovski 1998, 67). In Greek Aegean Macedonia people may also call themselves Macedonians (cf. Karakasidou 1997, 22) and there are minorities speaking Slavic Macedonian dialects at least in Bulgaria and Greece (cf. Karakasidou 1997; Lory 1996, 135–136). Macedonianity, therefore, has borders that do not entirely follow the nation-state’s borders (Lehti 1999b, 23). Thus, as Thiessen argues ‘[t]he identity of Macedonia as nation [...] is contested and there are overlaps between self-definitions of Macedonia as a state and Macedonians as a people’ (Thiessen 2007, 27).

<sup>54</sup> Concerning this question Friedman points out a linguistic detail: ‘Greeks claim that Ancient Macedonian was a dialect of Greek and therefore the original (Indo-European) inhabitants of Macedonia were Greek, but evidence indicates that Ancient Macedonian was linguistically separate from what later became Greek’ (Friedman 1997, 1443).

Conditions for free travel remain, however laborious for the Macedonian citizens. (Field diary; Thiessen 2010, 49)

Ethnic diversity has proved to be one of the most challenging factors in Macedonian administration and the country is seeking to establish stability in its inter-ethnic relations (cf. Thiessen 2007, 25). In the democratization process the relationship between the two largest ethnic groups has often assumed troublesome dimensions. The formulations used in the country's constitution have been given plenty of attention and some parts of its wording have been interpreted as remains of the communist heritage, or as a pursuit to articulate a difference between the *nationality* (national identity) and the *citizenship* (civil identity) as well as between a *constitutive nation* and a *minority* (cf. Andonovski 1998, 66–69). During recent years the repeatedly discussed status of the minorities has improved; a development that has been supported by the conditions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed in 2001 after the armed conflict between the two biggest ethnic groups (see e.g. Ragaru 2008, 48 and the Report by the Commissioner for Human Rights 2008, 21–22). The conflict that took place in 2000–2001, involved the rights and status of the minorities, but was also motivated by the questions related to economic resources, which obviously 'are closely connected to the political power and the organisation of the state' (Brunnbauer 2002, 2 and 14).<sup>55</sup>

The internationally brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement paved the way for major political reforms, which have brought about improvements in the rights of the Albanians (Brunnbauer 2002, 2–4; Krasniqi 2010, 26). Brunnbauer sees that the Macedonians experienced the agreement as a loss of security and a source of powerlessness. These aspects also had an impact on the way the Macedonian national identity was formed and how the national history was written (Brunnbauer 2002, 8). The conflict damaged the relations between the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community, as they had had the function of being the 'religious wings' of the rival ethnic groups. However, in 2002 the Council for Inter-religious Cooperation was established in Skopje. The conflict itself was not motivated by religion, but the global situation influenced it leading to the politicization of Islam through the actions of the Macedonian state and by the Albanian community, but in different ways. While Macedonian politicians aimed at addressing Islam in terms of the 'war on terror',

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<sup>55</sup> Some considered also that the aims of the extremist Albanians in this conflict were not the acquisition of rights, but of territories (Brunnbauer 2002, 8).

the Albanians strengthened their Islamic positioning in relation to the experienced threat from the Macedonian (Orthodox) side. (Krasniqi 2010, 26–28) The European Union accepted the Republic of Macedonia as a candidate country in 2005 (International Crisis Group 2006) and it applied for a membership in NATO in 2008, but this was stopped by a Greek veto (Le Courrier des Balkans 2008b).

Political life in the Republic of Macedonia is not without intense turns. Most of the Macedonian parties tend to be formed around one ‘ethnic soul’<sup>56</sup> and there seems to be a certain kind of lack of use and knowledge of the general, globally-deployed, political alignments. The influence of politics affects all levels of society even in a rather questionable way, as it tends to define the individual’s place in society and one’s possibilities of social ascent and employment. Corruption poses problems and people often express frustration that their voices at the societal level are not heard. (Field diary) The perceivable distrust between political elites and average citizens is probably mainly motivated by the nature of political life, which since 1991 has been ‘a mixture of clientelism and community-based politics’ (Ragaru 2008, 48). Also, the state’s social security system is modest and human rights and their implementation are continuously discussed (Field diary; Report by the Commissioner for Human Rights 2008). Thus, the common civil identity of the citizens remains very weak (cf. Brunnbauer 2002, 10). Nadège Ragaru reflects on the affect that politics have on the interethnic relations:

*In order to create legitimacy, politicians are often tempted to shift political debates from social and economic issues – over which they have only limited leverage – toward symbolic and national issues that can offer easy political gains. Sadly enough, interethnic relations are held hostage to these political strategies, thus fuelling both interethnic mistrust and political frustrations in all communities.*  
(Ragaru 2008, 48–49)

Hence, political strategies tend to increase the tensions between different groups. These societal developments can be placed on the continuum that begins in the 1980s and has been characterized mainly by two

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<sup>56</sup> Friedman notes that in 1990 the Socialist Republic of Macedonia was the only Yugoslav republic in which the ethnic-based parties did not have a majority in the elections (Friedman 1997, 1444). Bashkimi Iseni points out that in the contemporary circumstances all the ethnic groups, with the exception of the Macedonian one (partly), have created their political formations on an ethnic basis (Iseni 2007a, 24).

aspects: an affirmation of the national identities and the authorities' attempts to regain control over the situation (cf. Clayer 2001, 185–186).

Clayer (2001, 191–192) discusses centripetal and centrifugal drifts within the Macedonian Muslim community in the course of the democratization process.<sup>57</sup> When the societal framework is observed more comprehensively one can assume that similar drifts can also be identified in relations between other elements in the composition of Macedonian society. These drifts may generate antagonisms and dynamically changing loyalties between different societal entities, not only the Islamic ones. In the Macedonian context these tendencies seem to be particularly nourished by the prevailing mutual mistrust between the groups, which often has ethnic bases. There appears to be an important lack of concrete contacts between different groups, as for example, residential areas may be ethnically relatively homogeneous. (Field diary) Ragaru is of the opinion that even though interethnic relations have gradually recovered since the conflict of 2000–2001 the 'social distance between communities has on average increased' (Ragaru 2008, 42). Brunnbauer explains the divide between Macedonians and Albanians by stating that the more important urbanization of the Macedonians, a trend which has its origins in the beginnings of industrialization and urbanization in the 1950s, had social, economic and cultural consequences (Brunnbauer 2002, 14). Furthermore,

*[t]he rural lifestyles of many Albanians contribute to their marginalization on the labour market (as well as being a result of this) and also to the continuity of patriarchal values. Family and kin relations have much more importance among them due to the lack of trust in formal institutions. This nurtures fears among the Macedonians, who perceive Albanian micro-communities as virtually impenetrable and thus hard to control. Marginality, patriarchalism and rurality also have an impact on the demographic behaviour of the Albanians [...].*  
(Brunnbauer 2002, 15)

Thus, the societal context generates more fractured and communitarian groups, who find it difficult to trust one another. A general lack of solidarity could also be observed between different religious groups,

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<sup>57</sup> Clayer places these developments between two influences on the Islamic field: 1) the formation of new groups and movements within Macedonian Islam and 2) the change of administrative staff in the Islamic Community of the country. The new leaders tended to exercise a more centralized and controlled grip over religious activities, which have occasionally created new disagreements. (Clayer 2001, 192; cf. Mol 1978, 6)

of which particularly the smaller groups may suffer. To this can be added the role played by interpretations of historical events and facts, as well as the issues related to diverse conflicts that have taken place in the area and which all are seen and understood differently, depending on the group.<sup>58</sup> How history is perceived and narrated can have a strengthening or a weakening impact on national, ethnic and religious identities and also inform the images one has of the other groups. These collective and private memories can reinforce the experienced threat that is considered to be directed at the cultural or religious existence of group members. Insufficient attention given to the rights of all minorities in the country's legislation and their incomplete implementation, as well as attempts to aim at economic and / or personal gain within administrative structures and the insufficient focus these give to concrete political issues, maintain the fragility of the relations between the groups. (Cf. Brown 2000; Brunnbauer 2002; Field diary; Lehti 1999b 42–43)

All of the above-mentioned factors contribute to a situation in which cohesion inside the groups increases and distance *vis-à-vis* others becomes more important. Probably the most significant antagonism can be perceived between Macedonians and Albanians (cf. Ragaru 2008, 42), but it also involves other ethnic groups. The attempts at bridging cleavages are slowed down by the denial of the existence of Macedonian national identity in international as well as, in some form, in the national<sup>59</sup> context and the often from the outside seemingly closed nature of the Albanian community, which can have more or less perceptible patriarchal residues<sup>60</sup>. The above-mentioned urbanization (cf. Thiessen 2007 and 2010; Balkan Insight 2010) of the Macedonian-speaking population also creates a cleavage *vis-à-vis* the often more rural lifestyles of many Albanians. Indicators of group relations can be the number of mixed marriages, which has been modest<sup>61</sup> and the rate of endogamy among Albanians, which is traditionally high (cf. Brunnbauer 2002, 14–15). The status of other minorities has often been

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<sup>58</sup> As Rasku states that historical myth can attribute special qualities to the group, extend its distinctiveness, create boundaries and give meaning to self-perception of the community (Rasku 2007, 139).

<sup>59</sup> Referring here to the statements concerning the artificial nature of Macedonian identity (Field diary).

<sup>60</sup> This however is typical for the whole cultural sphere of the western Balkans (see e.g. Simić 1999).

<sup>61</sup> The number of mixed marriages in 1999 was 16 (Brunnbauer 2002, 15).

neglected when negotiations concerning the rights of the two largest ethnic groups have taken place.<sup>62</sup>

Thiessen claims that in the new political order marked by outside-influenced political discourse concerning privatization and inter-ethnic conflicts, the private sphere of social relationships has remained unpoliticized and due to this 'certain socialist achievements concerning gender equality remain legally untouched' (Thiessen 2010, 46). For example abortion has remained legal and the attempts to change eight-hour working days have been resisted (Thiessen 2010, 46). However, I would estimate that Macedonian society is changing regarding this latter aspect too, as attempts to gain economic profit become increasingly meaningful and in a context in which unemployment is high people are ready to accept even inhuman working conditions and work long days without satisfactory reimbursement. Also, the social relationships at least between different groups suffer and deteriorate from the stereotyping the wider political framework imposes. As for the general state of gender equality Ramet thinks that it remained uncompleted in Tito's time and to achieve it there would need to be 'a frontal assault on the cultural, psychological, religious, social, economic, and political bastions of patriarchy' (Ramet 1999b, 105). The significant influence of nationalist discourses tends to place women more into the private sphere, where they are seen as the ones who are responsible particularly of domestic life and reproduction (Bracewell 1996, 214).

The relationship between Muslims and Christians in the Republic of Macedonia can be placed not only in a local, but also in a global context. The situation is strongly linked to belonging to a certain group, as Albanians are mainly Muslims and Macedonians are Orthodox Christians. Through this antagonism the global conflict between Islam and the 'West' also has a role in the positions taken by different actors. When on one side there are hopes to prove the European nature of the Macedonian populations, on the other side nostalgia towards the Ottoman era may be expressed. In this context Islam is often considered to be an element that disrupts societal development.<sup>63</sup> The new com-

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<sup>62</sup> Many of the women interviewed for instance expressed repeatedly their concern for the rights of Roma.

<sup>63</sup> This is an opinion that is often more visibly manifest on the Christian side (Field diary; cf. Thiessen 2007, 35). Clayer notes that this is also to some extent expressed among the Albanians, particularly vividly in Albania and in the Republic of Kosovo (Clayer 2001, 207).

positions that articulate the relationship between the religious and the national (or nationalist) aspects and groups have also surfaced in the organizational structure of and in the politics exercised by the Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia (see for example Clayer 2001).

The in many ways fractured societal body and the prevailing lack of social cohesion generate a field of tensions, which might offer fertile ground to different extreme ideologies (e.g. nationalist, religious, pro- or anti-Western), which predominantly tend to advance fast and often short-sighted solutions to complex problems. In the process of societal re-organization questions related to belonging and identity play key roles. As a part of this process, religion at its best could contribute, bringing in structural cohesive elements instead of widening cleavages between different groups.

### **Islamic Structures in Transition**

In this subsection I discuss what the above described societal transition has meant for Islamic structures in the Republic of Macedonia. After the fall of the socialist/communist governments, most of the Balkan nations experienced a revival of religion and the religious institutions entered political life. In Yugoslavia this was related to the disappearance of socialist ideology, but also due to the use of religious discourse in suffusing the emergence of more accentuated nationalisms. (Krasniqi 2010, 10) The new political situation brought several positive things to the Balkan Muslims: freedom of expression and circulation, intensified contacts with the external Islamic world and a possibility for foreign Islamic preachers and movements to enter the new states. On the other hand Muslims, like other populations, had to face extremely difficult economic and societal situations as well as the consequences of armed conflicts and political unrest. (Popovic 2002, 10)

The disturbed balance of Yugoslav state's existence as well as the reforms of the Islamic religious institutions in 1990 modified the Macedonian Islamic community and its functionality. (CEDIME-SE 2000, 9; Clayer 2001, 193) After the declaration of independence Macedonian citizens were granted freedom of religion and all the religious communities were defined equal. According to the Macedonian constitution the country has no state religion. However, initially the constitution mentioned only the Macedonian Orthodox Church. This changed in



2001, when the status of the religious communities was determined more precisely. According to an addition to constitution, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Islamic Religious Community, Catholic Church, Jewish Community and Evangelical Methodist Church as well as other religious communities, which are functional in the country, are separated from the state and in an equal position in the face of law. However, in mentioning only the names of five communities the constitution places the other communities unequally. (Laitila 2011, 77)

Macedonian Islamic institutions were declared independent from the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia in 1994 (CEDIME-SE 2000, 9; Clayer 2001, 193). Sulejman Rexhepi, a Muslim of Albanian origins, was appointed to the post of reis-ul-ulema of the Macedonian Muslim community in 1991. Jakub Selimoski had preceded him in this post. Rexhepi was re-elected in 1994 and then became the leader of an independent Islamic Community in the Republic of Macedonia<sup>64</sup>. (Clayer 2001, 193) From the outset Rexhepi tended to increase the Albanian influence, but also the Turkish one, within the community. The position of the Albanians had suffered, relatively speaking, due to the Macedonian campaigns against Albanian nationalism in the 1980s. Rexhepi replaced the principal leaders of the community and pushed for more centralization in its activities. In parallel the diasporic Muslim communities that were economically particularly important organized themselves. Co-operative relations were linked to the Muslim communities of Kosovo and Albania. (Clayer 2001, 193)

The first law on religious communities in the independent Republic of Macedonia was passed in 1997. It was experienced as unsatisfactory particularly by the smaller religious communities, as it stated that only the five above-mentioned communities could be functional in the country. The law was amended in 1998 and discussed many times, a development that was also supported by the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The Macedonian parliament accepted a new law on the religious communities and groups in 2007 and it was implemented in May 2008. This meant that all the religious communities had to be re-registered. The five 'traditional' religious communities were registered automatically: others had to apply for a registration. Around ten communities have been registered, while some others still remain unregis-

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<sup>64</sup> Later known as *Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia*, in Albanian *Bashkësia Fetare Islame në Republikën e Maqedonisë* (BFI) and in Macedonian *Islamska verska zaednitsa vo Republika Makedonija* (IVZ).

tered.<sup>65</sup> One of the most important changes in the legislation was that now several communities could represent one religion. The religious communities were, once registered, also given the status of a juridical person. The communities could also establish religious schools and outside the curriculum provide students, who have finished elementary school, with a religious education. Compared to the 1997 law, the new law does not seem discriminatory. However, the registration processes of the religious communities in the country have not been entirely problem free. (Laitila 2011, 77–79)

There are important differences between Islamic fields in different Balkan states. For example the Kosovar and the Macedonian regions have lacked an Islamic religious intelligentsia compared to Bosnia-Herzegovina in recent decades. Many of the earlier Turkish or Albano-Turkish members of the religious intelligentsia emigrated from the Republic of Macedonia to Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s. And the new Albanian elite received its education under the communist, nationalist and even anti-religious influences, often at the University of Prishtina. The distribution of religious literature in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia was quantitatively less significant than in the Bosnia-Herzegovina. The different Islamist networks have started to gain political and religious space in the Macedonian religious scenery relatively late. This development has emerged predominantly due to the intermediary affect of the young *ulema* educated in Sarajevo. The new regional religious hierarchies have sometimes viewed these groups as not having a sufficient theological or intellectual capacity and therefore they have sometimes marginalized them. (Cf. Clayer 2001, 238)

In an early phase some dissatisfaction and reluctance surfaced towards new Islamic leaders and structures. This manifested itself for example in the tensions between the *muftinias* of Tetovo and Skopje.

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<sup>65</sup> Religious communities with official status: 1) Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric, 2) Catholic Church in the Republic of Macedonia, 3) United Methodist Church in Macedonia, 4) Christian Adventist Church – Church of the 7th Day Adventist's in the Republic of Macedonia, 5) Christian Adventist Church in Macedonia, 6) Christian Baptist Church, 7) United Congregation Church, 8) New Apostolic Church in Macedonia, 9) Evangelical Church in the Republic of Macedonia, 10) Christian Centre in the Republic of Macedonia, 11) God's Church in the Republic of Macedonia, 12) Islamic Community in the Republic of Macedonia, 13) Jewish Community in the Republic of Macedonia, 14) Jehova Witnesses – Christian Religious Community, 15) Holy Seat and Crown of Erenler Tarikat Religious Community in Macedonia, 16) Satja Sai Centre – Skopje, 17) Vaishnava Religious Community and 18) Christian Community Universal Life (Field diary, information given by the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation in 2009).

(Clayer 2001, 194–195) Political changes did not dramatically transform the circumstances for the tarikats. Most certainly these profited at least to some extent from the rapid revival of the Sufi brotherhoods in the neighbouring Albania. (Popovic 1996, 388) The independence of the Macedonian state meant for the tarikats a kind of struggle on two fronts, as they were on the margins of the established societies and as the local Islamic authorities often tended to marginalize them. The active tarikats in the post-socialist Balkans could be primarily found in the former Yugoslav territories and in Albania. Nonetheless their numbers of members remained marginal compared to the other Muslim communities in the respective countries. (Popovic 2002, 5 and 10)

All Islamic groups in the Republic of Macedonia, despite their doctrinal differences, are gathered under the umbrella of the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) and the IRC is responsible for their needs and activities (Interview 12). The IRC holds the place of a central representative organ of Islamic cultural life in the country. It also organizes religious life and is in charge of taking care of the property, *vakuf*, or religious endowment that has been donated to the community over the centuries. The IRC's organizational structure is composed of two levels: the headquarters and local bodies. The presidency of the Islamic Religious Community, *rijaset*, is lead by reis-ul-ulema, who currently is Hadj Efendi Sulejmani Rexhepi. The local institutions, *muftinias*, are locally self-governed and these administrative units are thirteen in number. These units can be found for example in Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, Krušhevo, Debar, Struga, Ohrid, Štip and Bitola. (Interview 10) Under the reis-ul-ulema are the chief of staff and the general secretary, who are followed by different institutional directors responsible for different domains such as the condition of the mosques. Approxi-

mately twenty people are employed by the IRC, excluding drivers and maintenance staff. The Muslim community finances the activities of the IRC. A reference person described the situation to me through an interpreter:

*Every Muslim house, I mean true believer is, is paying for his practicing of his religion [...] from that membership we are paying the the monthly [...] salary for the imams, for the people who take care about mosques [...] teachers [...] and with those money we are taking care of the medresa high school [...] and the Faculty of [...] Islamic Science.*  
(Interview 12)

Two educational institutions function within the Islamic Religious Community: the Faculty of Islamic Science and Isa Beg medrese, both located in the suburbs of Skopje, in Kondovo. Isa Beg medrese has also established new branches in the cities of Gostivar, Štip, Tetovo and Skopje. According to Islamic jurisdiction women and men have to study in separated institutional schools, and of the newly opened institutions the one in Tetovo is for women only. Women also have opportunities to receive Islamic education in Skopje and Gostivar. (Interview 10; Field diary) Until now most of the imams have been educated elsewhere, as there were no opportunities to receive Islamic education in the Republic of Macedonia before 1984, when the Isa Beg medrese was re-opened. Since 1997 the situation has improved even more due to the establishment of the Islamic faculty. (Interview 12) There have been disagreements concerning the status which could be accorded to the Islamic faculty, but nowadays it is a mainly state funded and constitutionally approved establishment. It is attached to the Albanian-language University of Tetovo, but functions autonomously. The IRC is also concerned with the diasporic Muslim communities and it educates and sends scholars abroad to teach them. (Interview 10)

Previously the IRC's border-crossing ties with other Muslim communities were particularly important in relation to Syria and Egypt, but nowadays there is cooperation mainly with the ex-Yugoslav states: Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republic of Kosovo, but also with Albania, Turkey and the Arab world (Interview 10; Interview 12; cf. Clayer 2001, 198; Iseni 2007b, 16). The most important are those with Albanian and Kosovar Islamic communities. Ties with Turkey are linked to the long historical association and close geographical location, but also the Islamic traditions and practices are intimately related to each other and the Islamic spaces for public religious practice often date back to the Ottoman period. Contacts with other Islamic countries and communities are said to have been less active during the period preceding Rexhepi's presidency, but nowadays the IRC would be more perceptibly 'open to everybody'. (Interview 10)

In the dynamic process of change in the religious life in the Republic of Macedonia, the complex cultural and civilizational relationship with the 'West' has also been re-evaluated. Despite fragmentation within the IRC, its strength lies in its official societal status, which gives it opportunities to function as the privileged interlocutor with the outside Muslim world. (Cf. Clayer 2001, 197) All of these developments are signs of a revival of the Macedonian Islam that becomes visible, for example, in the restoration and construction of the mosques, the production and diffusion of religious literature, the contacts with different Islamic networks, the support given to the students who are sent to study abroad, mainly to Islamic countries, and the opening of Islamic school establishments (cf. Clayer 2001, 198).

In 1989, the Balkan Muslims had already seen the formation of important, secularly oriented currents within their communities, as well as new, socialist and secular elites. Developments contrasted with circumstances that had dominated only two generations ago when a person's identity was essentially linked to religion and geographical and familial origins. Religion remained, however, an important factor. According to Xavier Bougarel and Nathalie Clayer the surveys have shown that the religiosity of Muslim Albanians in Yugoslavia was more prominent than the religiosity of the Christian populations. Without taking into the consideration the level of religiosity and practice, Islam has endured as a significant marker of identity. However, Islam is not the only identity marker; the regional, social and familial

memberships give their contribution to this identity construction too. The fall of communist regime, the introduction of political pluralism and the growing opportunities to make contacts with the external world have permitted these identity developments to enter the political scene, and lately many national identities seem to have crystallized themselves among the Balkan Muslims in a more emphatic manner. Simultaneously the question of the redefinition of the relation between the national and Muslim identities has been, is and will remain topical. (Cf. Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 33–34)

## The Islamic Presence in the Republic of Macedonia

*La divergence au sein de ma communauté est une bénédiction du Dieu.  
Quel que soit celui de mes compagnons que vous suivrez, vous serez sur  
la bonne voie.  
(From Hadith texts<sup>66</sup>)*

In this section I will present the demographic structure and characteristics of the Macedonian Muslim community. Muslims make up about a third (33.33%; Census 2002) of the Macedonian population. In a state which has a little over two million inhabitants this means around 674,015 persons (Census 2002). According to the statistics of the Islamic Religious Community, there are more than a million Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia. This figure includes also the Muslim population that lives in the diaspora beyond the borders of the country. (Interview 10) Albanians represent the majority, a slightly more than 70% (509,083) of the whole Muslim population.<sup>67</sup> Turks are the second largest group (ca. 12% or 77,959), followed by Roma<sup>68</sup> (ca. 8%

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<sup>66</sup> These hadiths are often referred to when tolerance towards juridical pluralism within the Islamic tradition is addressed (Benkheira 2005, 47).

<sup>67</sup> It is difficult to find independent data on the number of Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia. Only citizens, and not residents, can participate in the census and members of minorities have occasionally faced political and technical difficulties in acquiring citizenship. (CEDIME-SE 2000, 3) For example, due to relatively recent migratory movements of the Albanians from the Kosovo region to the Republic of Macedonia, not all them can participate in the census, which requires having a Macedonian citizenship (cf. Clayer 2001, 178–179; for more about the citizenship criteria see e.g. Poulton 2000, 182–184).

<sup>68</sup> Including, most likely, the group of ‘Egyptians’ a category that was introduced in the census of 1991: for more details see for example the chapter ‘The Making of Egyptians in Kosovo and Macedonia’ in Duijzings 2000, 132–156. The Roma might also declare themselves to belong to other groups. Thus, their number might be in reality more significant.

or 53,879). Clayer estimated the number of the Torbešis who are Slavic-speakers,<sup>69</sup> to be around 10% (ca. 70 000) in 1994. In 2002 Bosnians<sup>70</sup> represented about 2.5% (17,018) of the Muslim population. Clayer distinguishes one more category of Muslims, that of urban Muslims, often with a mixed Turkish-Albanian background, whom Clayer estimates to have close ties with Turkish culture – meaning often both Albanian and Turkish (Clayer 2001, 181).<sup>71</sup> The borders between these ethnic and national categories of Muslims have never been very stable and figures are often approximate. The factors affecting this can be the occasionally consolidating Albanian or Turkish tendencies in the society, the impact of mixed marriages and the changes in the determination of the national identity that the population can make on socio-economic or political grounds. (State Statistical Office b, 62 and 335; Clayer 2001, 178–179)

According to the official figures representing the confessional structure of the population in the Republic of Macedonia, very little has changed between 1953 and 2002; the proportion of Christians has remained close to two thirds while Muslims have represented one third of the population (State Statistical Office b, 335; Clayer 2001, 180). The numbers of Albanians have increased due to the internal migratory movements within Yugoslavia and this seems to have compensated to some extent for the significant emigration of Muslims to Turkey. Albanians have as well tended to have relatively large families. There has also been an inversion in the relation between Turkish and Albanian groups, caused by the above-mentioned factors, in parallel with a valorization of Albanian national consciousness, which may have meant an assimilation of other Muslim groups into the Albanian community. (Cf. Clayer 2001, 180–181)

The Albanian-speaking Muslim population is geographically concentrated in the northern and western parts of the country close to the state borders the Republic of Macedonia shares with Albania, the Republic of Kosovo and Serbia (for demographic maps see Ap-

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<sup>69</sup> Muslim Macedonians, known sometimes also as Pomaks, are not considered to be a separate nation in the census, which is why their number can only be an estimated one. They may identify themselves in the census for example as Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Muslims or as undefined.

<sup>70</sup> Even though Islam most probably remains as the principal marker of identity for the Bosnian Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it could be noted that not all of these people are necessarily Muslims as they can also identify themselves according to, for instance, their citizenship.

<sup>71</sup> One of the interviewed women belonged to this group.

pendix IV). Albanians form an important majority in cities of Debar (58%), Gostivar (67%), Struga (57%) and Tetovo (70%). They represent a strong minority in the cities of Kičevo (31%), Kumanovo (26%) and Skopje (20%) (State Statistical Office d).<sup>72</sup> Concerning the Muslim populations, Clayer states that they are often rural or have a rural background. And due to the relatively recent rural exodus, the weight of these populations has now moved towards the cities. Since the 1960s there have also been mainly economically motivated migratory movements of changing numerical importance which are of a seasonal and temporary nature in the poorly developed Macedonian regions. The migrations within Yugoslavian territory up until 1990, as well as migrations to more industrialized destinations in Europe and in America have also affected the population's demographic structure. (Clayer 2001, 181–182)

Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia are predominantly Sunnis, belonging to the most widespread Islamic school of legal thought worldwide – the Hanafi school of law. A relatively marginal percentage of the Muslims are estimated to belong to more extreme groups or are members of Sufi brotherhoods. (Cf. Interview 12) The most important Sufi brotherhood, *tarikāt*, is represented by the Bektashi Community in the Republic of Macedonia, which is one of the biggest, if not the most widespread of the *tarikats* in the contemporary Balkans. The activity of Albanians has always been and still is very important within this community. (Cf. Popovic 1986b, 66–67) The Bektashis respect the twelve Imams, a feature that is more common in Shi'a Islam. The world centre of the Bektashi *tarikāt* is currently situated in Albania, where it moved from Turkey in the 1920s. However, it was discontinued from around 1940, up until to at least 1990, for political reasons. *Tarikāt* has a hierarchical structure, as well as specific beliefs, rites and practices. Each *tekke* is headed by a spiritual master, *baba*. Today the leading figure of the Bektashi Community in the Republic of Macedonia is Baba Edmond Brahimaj, also known as Baba Mondī. (Field diary; Popovic 2002, 12)

The Islamic presence in the Republic of Macedonia is rendered more diverse by the existence of a small number of Muslims belonging to

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<sup>72</sup> The borders of the Macedonian municipalities changed in 2004 and this may influence the percentages. Of the current 84 municipalities 16 have an Albanian majority.



other tarikats, such as the Khalvetis, the Rufa'is<sup>73</sup> and the Sa'dis<sup>74</sup>, as well as the presence of the more recently established Holy Seat and Crown of Erenler Tarikat Religious Community. The latter gathers mainly Romani-speaking believers. In my fieldwork I came across the premises of all these above-mentioned Islamic groups. However none of my informants had particular links with these groups. That is why, except for the Bektashis, less attention is given to them in this study. Other religious bodies that are based on a range of Islamic values, such as some non-governmental organizations of an educative, cultural or humanitarian nature or organizations directed to the youth, have been established since 1991. The relations the Macedonian religious bodies have with the Muslim communities of the neighboring countries are facilitated by the lower language barriers, similarities at the level of cultural heritage as well as in terms of somewhat similar developments that can be discerned in their respective religious fields. (Cf. Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 9–12; Clayer 2001, 227; Elsie 2001, 30; Field diary; Mahmudi 2009, 7)

### **The Diversifying Islamic Field**

In this subsection the diversifying Islamic field in the Republic of Macedonia is examined in more detail. According to Clayer (2001, 199) four entities have been formed within the Macedonian Muslim community since the introduction of democracy. Firstly there are the ethnic Muslim groups; secondly the political parties, which aim to represent the first mentioned; thirdly the religious Islamic movements and institutions; and finally foreign actors who have entered the Macedonian religious field. Clayer describes the relations between these groups as 'multidirectional'. As the ethnic Muslim groups were introduced in the previous section and due to the less important religious role of the political actors, I will concentrate in this subsection more on the two last-mentioned groups.

The political organization of the Muslims is strongly linked to ethnic-national diversity as well as to the structural changes within the Islamic Religious Community, which is often based on ethnic motiva-

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<sup>73</sup> Also known as the Rifa'is.

<sup>74</sup> Popovic mentions also the presence of Melami centres in the Macedonian territory in 1989 (Popovic 2002, 7). In the current circumstances there most likely is also a very small number of members belonging to Naqshbandi tarikat and Shi'ite Ehli Beyt association (Field diary; cf. Popovic 2002, 13–14).

tions. Albanians tend to dominate the Islamic field both religiously and politically and give Macedonian Islam national and even nationalist features. At the same time the Turks and Turkish-Albanian play an important role when it comes to relations with the external Muslim world and development of the reformist and modernist, even pan-Islamist currents. The Torbešis have a less high profile status, even though their membership in social groups seems to have been in the interest of many, who try to make them join their 'camp'. Bosnians in the Republic of Macedonia have tended to follow more closely the political and religious developments of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandžak. (Clayer 2001, 199)

The winds of democratization which blew in 1989–1990 had a twofold effect for the Islamic presence in the Republic of Macedonia-to-be. Clayer characterizes these drifts, as mentioned earlier, as centrifugal and centripetal. They resulted in a certain recomposition of Macedonian Islam. It meant that a variety groups and currents, which either were or were not influenced by the external Islamic world, emerged within the Islamic field. The Islamic Religious Community's management was handed over to the Albanian Muslims, who aimed at centralizing and controlling all the religious activities; a situation that led to disagreements. These events have been followed by a complex interplay of permanent decompositions and recompositions on the Islamic religious scene, which included not only the religious, but also political, ethnic, financial, sometimes even some personal or other factors. (Clayer 2001, 192)

Tendencies to create religious groupings on ethnic basis had been halted within the Islamic Religious Community, but their external formation had been tolerated. Such is the case of The Holy Seat and Crown of Erenler Tarikat Religious Community in Macedonia, established in 1992 mainly by Romani-speaking Muslims.<sup>75</sup> The leader of this community lives in Šuto Orizari, also known as Šutka, a suburb of Skopje where an important concentration of the Roma community lives. (Clayer 2001, 195–196; Field diary; Popovic 2002, 15) The Holy

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<sup>75</sup> Probably networks of tekkes that were a part of ZIDRA of Prizren before the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Popovic 2002, 15). In 1974 the shaykh from the Rifa'i tarikat in the Kosovar city of Prizren took an initiative to form a union of shaykhs and dervishes, which was called SIDRA (Savez Islamskih Derviških Redova Alije u SFRJ; Union of Islamic Alia Dervish Orders in Yugoslavia). Four years later the name changed into ZIDRA (thus it was identifying itself as a 'community' instead of a 'union'; Zajednica Islamskih Derviških Redova Alije u SFRJ; Community of Islamic Alia Dervish Orders in Yugoslavia). (Popovic 1996, 383)

Seat and Crown of Erenler Tarikat Religious Community was said to bring together around 18,000 believers. The *zikh* ritual, which aimed at seeking unity with God, was practised twice a week, on Sundays and Thursdays at dusk at about six or seven o'clock (Interview 11; Cf. Clayer 1990, 81). The numbers of people attending to *zikh* in the community varied and God's names had an important and central significance for its ritual performance. The reference person from the community I interviewed explained through an interpreter how the *shaykh* of the tarikat performed a *zikh*: 'When he do[es] the *zikh* [...] [it is] about the God's name, with the God's name' (Interview 11). Meditation was also a part of this tarikat's religious practice and my reference person, who had a high position in the tarikat, considered that devoted Sufis were actually doing *zikh* constantly with their whole body, as the key aspect of religious practice was at all times the contact one had with God.

It was mentioned that the Sufis in Erenler Tarikat believed in re-incarnation and that they had had a different body in previous life. The idea of actions having consequences probably also influenced the next re-incarnation. (Interview 11) The attitude the tarikat had towards other religions was amiable and approving and the tarikat had contacts with many other communities abroad, such as Buddhists and Hindus. To communicate with the people, my reference person said that one used 'the heart and the head' and invited people in unity as one considered that this was the Sufi way to be. Within the tarikat issues related to personages such as Sai Baba, Meher Baba,<sup>76</sup> Jesus or Muhammad were studied. The interviewed reference person explained through an interpreter that this aimed at calling in unity on 'all the people who trust in God, all the people, it doesn't matter about the religion [...] to mediate [...] about the Gods [it] doesn't matter the religion [...] but [it matters] to trust in God' (Interview 11). This holistic view meant for the reference person that s/he knew only of 'one religion, one [...] nation [...], only one God' (Interview 11). According to its Constitution the tarikats are a part of the Islamic Religious Community. The Meshihat na Tarikatite (Council of the Tarikat Elders) organ, which functions within the IRC gathers at least seemingly all the tarikats and at its head is the elected Shehjul-ulema (CEDIME-SE 2000, 20). In reality the most important of the minority communities, the Bektashis, and the Holy Seat and Crown of the Erenler Tarikat Religious Community seem to have very loose contacts with these

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<sup>76</sup> Sai Baba and Meher Baba are spiritual masters from India.

structures. And the status of the Bektashi Community remains unofficial<sup>77</sup> (Field diary; Kushtetuta e BFI-së 2008, 18; Popovic 2002, 15)

The rest of the Muslim world has followed the Islamic revival in the Balkans closely and its interest has manifested itself in the forms of missionary work (*da'wa*), the opening of religious schools and in the offer of (often desperately needed) economic support, which has not always been very disinterested. This has furthered fragmentation of the Islamic field, because every Islamic movement has tended to bring along its own politics, ideology and version of the faith. (Popovic 1998) Among the foreign, Islamic, religious and politico-religious movements that have found their way to the Republic of Macedonia are the movement of Fethullahci from Turkey, the Pakistani Jamaat-al-Tabligh, the Ahmadiyya and Shi'ites, as well as some Salafist movements with various Arab origins and the pan-Islamic movements inspired by the work of the former President of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović. Some humanitarian organizations have also promoted more restrictive Islamic currents. (Cf. Clayer 2001, 195–197) In the field, the new Islamic groups were often referred to as Salafis and Wahhabis. One reference person did not see the differences between Islamic groups as being so important, but estimated that due to the people's sometimes poor abilities to absorb some issues related to Islam, new groups had managed to awaken tensions with others. These groups might have more extreme views, for example on how women should be and behave, or wear the veil and covering clothing. They might also endeavour to spread their views and were not receptive to those of the others. (Interview 12) However, it was highlighted that the nature of Islam in general in the Republic of Macedonia was soft. Despite some preachers who had studied elsewhere and might have more extreme ideas, all in all Islam remained moderate. (Interview 10 and 12)

It is difficult to exhaustively map the NGO field in the Republic of Macedonia and the values or religious interpretations on which they possibly base their activities. The situation is changing dynamically and not all of the organizations are visible for example on the internet network, or have the opportunities to produce publications, which would make them and their activities more easily perceivable. In the field I could observe the presence of at least the following humanitar-

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<sup>77</sup> Popovic speculates that if the governmental authorities are hesitant about accepting the application of the Bektashis because they want to avoid the possible disagreements it might lead to with the Islamic Religious Community (Popovic 2002, 15).

ian organizations with Islamic values: *El-Hilal* (Crescent) is the largest Islamic humanitarian organization in the country; others that can be mentioned are *Kalliri i Mirësisë* (Ear of Goodness) directed to the orphans and people suffering from poverty and being affected by the conflicts and *Merhamet* (Mercy) that has a women's division. *Bamirësia* (Charity) is an organization which has probably absorbed Salafist influences. *Jeta* (Life) is most likely an Albanian organization and *Ensar* a Turkish one. There are also non-governmental bodies with Islamic tendencies and values, which are educative, cultural or directed to the youth and these include for instance the Turkish *Matusiteb*; *Vizioni-M* (Vision M) which organizes petitions, lessons, events, debates and has a small library; *Klubi Studentor* (Student Klub) which is active for example in publishing Islamic literature; *El-Kalem* (Word), which is an Islamic cultural centre and Albanian *Ardhmëria* (Future) of which information is lacking. (Field diary; Iseni 2007b; Mahmudi 2009, 7) *Forumi Rinor Islam* (Islamic Youth Forum) is sometimes perceived as a promoter of 'genuine Islam'. With its 'competitive' programme, which seems to contain traces of Salafist or reformist influences, it might sometimes irritate the Islamic Religious Community. (Clayer 2001, 196; Field diary)

External Islamic influences in the Republic of Macedonia are predominantly of Turkish and Arabic origin and they form a kind of mutual competition constellation (Iseni 2007a, 33). There are two poles of influence nearby; Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina and two remote ones; Iran and the Arab countries, whose impact is furthered by the mediation of the population living in diaspora in Western Europe (Clayer 2001, 239). Religious affinities, as well as cultural, economic and political contacts with Turkey have been seen by some as attempts to block the way from the movements and organizations with a more fundamentalist agenda with the Turkish moderate type of Hanafi Islam (Iseni 2007a, 33). Clayer notes that even though there are no major Islamic streams inside Macedonian society and the impact of nationalism is dominant, Islam has already, during the decade which followed the fall of communism, taken a visible place in society and played a role in the internal recompositions of the Muslim community (Clayer 2001, 240).

In the next chapter I discuss the methods and practices used in the fieldwork and in the analytical processes. These methods, together with theoretical framework, facilitated the structuring and analyses of the interview material gathered.

## 4 Methods and Practices Employed in the Fieldwork and Analysis

### Accepting Uncertainty

The fieldwork methodology of this study follows the tradition of the ethnography of religion (see e.g. Day 2009, McGuire 2002b, Spickard 2009 and 2002) and aims to sketch religion in a way that illustrates the lived, everyday religion and religiosity which McGuire (2008) and Ammerman (2007a, 2007b and 2003) speak of, as particularly women's religious practice has often received less academic attention in this domain (cf. Keinänen 2010). To study a lived religion means to observe it from a wider perspective and also take into consideration the experiences of people who are not some kind of religious professionals, and to perceive religion in both private and public places; also outside organized religious life and religious institutions. Hence, this perspective can provide us with information as to how religion may be an integral part of the lives of people. (Ammerman 2007a, 5) People's religious worlds are often constructed intersubjectively, even though lived religion concerns the individual (McGuire 2008, 12). At this individual level 'religion is not fixed, unitary or even coherent' (McGuire 2008, 12) and thus shares many characteristics with identity formation (cf. Chapter Two). The perspective on a lived religion can put more weight on religious practices than beliefs, but it can facilitate a better understanding of 'individual religion in all its complexity and diversity' (McGuire 2008, 15 and 16). Lived religion is inlaid in one's everyday practices, in the concrete means by which the body and emotions engage in being religious. Religious socialization and interactions with others may play a role in determining each individual's religiosity, but do not do so exhaustively. (McGuire 2008, 208)

In this chapter I discuss firstly the hermeneutical anchoring of the study within the ethnographic framework. Secondly, I introduce the fieldwork methods used and describe the concrete fieldwork experience I gained in the Republic of Macedonia, and the material gathered. Thirdly, the methods in the field, thematically structured in-depth interviews and participant observation, are examined more closely. Finally, I elaborate on the continuous dialogue that takes place between the researcher and the gathered qualitative material in the course of the ethnographic research process.

Hermeneutics as a philosophy is a way to reflect, to position and to relate oneself which questions all truths considered to be absolute (Vikström 2005, 10). In other words, the aim in defining the methodological frame for a hermeneutical research effort, such as this ethnographic study, is not to create fixed images that would inhibit the continuity of analysis, but rather to facilitate this process which ideally would also endure in time (cf. Illman 2004, 34). Hermeneutical research is interpretative and all interpretation aims at surpassing the limits that time<sup>78</sup> sets between the interpreting subject and the object of interpretation. I, as the interpreting subject, have strived to internalize the meaning of the research object, to become familiar with it and, finally, apply it to myself. Through understanding the other, I may aspire to a deepening of my understanding of myself. In this manner all hermeneutical interpretations explicitly and implicitly build on the assumption that one can understand oneself through understanding the other. (Cf. Ricœur 2005 [1969], 154–155) This characterized my time in the field and the process of analyzing the material, when I could perceive myself more clearly in relation to other(s) and I was also transformed as a person as I learned more about other(s) and their interpretations of the world (cf. Spickard 2009, 993).

As Johannes Ojansuu points out, competent scientific knowledge does not strive to explain away uncertainty, but rather points towards continuously arising, puzzling new research questions (Ojansuu 2004, 105). These aspects arose frequently in my research process, for instance in terms of Islamic religiosity, which I was to a certain extent familiar with, but which, as a lived everyday praxis appeared to be much more nuanced and functioned as a source of continuous inspiration and amazement. In my work the humility that I experienced as a part of this learning process, often brought me close to questions that touch on uncertainty, particularly because the study conducted made me familiar with a culture, language and religion other than my own. I hope that this experience of uncertainty, which evidently has a role in the outcome of my work, has granted worthy space also to that which is considered holy by the person(s), whose religious expe-

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<sup>78</sup> Ricœur refers here particularly to the context within which a text, which has its own cultural period of time, is interpreted. The perspective could also be applied in other respects. For instance in the focus of this study is a relatively recent material, but for understanding it certain historical influences remain significant. One could also ask if interpreting as an act does not surpass the limits that the space and place set for it, as the interpretation and analysis of the research material often takes place in a different context than within which the actual gathering of material did.

riences and identities I strived to study and to come close to. As my aim is not to take a position towards or be offensive about anything that for someone else is meaningful and holy, but rather to analyze the relationship and the impact these aspects have on one's identity construction.

I agree with Ojansuu when he states that the assumption of certainty cannot be regarded as a necessary criterion for research in the humanities, as this assumption aims at locking the world into an immutable and perdurable state which cannot be empirically proven (cf. Ojansuu 2004, 88 and 96). My aim is therefore not to filter out something that could be considered as the only valid truth, but to present a well-founded analysis of the topic from my own position as a researcher and also willingly to expose this work to the judgment of its reader (cf. Illman 2004, 34–35; Spickard 2002, 245). However, a commitment to 'truth' as a regulative ideal that I strived for in my descriptions and analysis can deepen and render more complete the scientific inquiry (cf. Spickard 2002, 251; Spickard 2009, 994–995). Finally, the work itself is produced in the process of reading, as a collaboration between the study and its reader, during which process their respective worlds are brought together (Ricœur 2005 [1990], 172 and 174).

When conducting an ethnographic study which aims at introducing new perspectives of continuously improved quality and bringing new ingredients and stimuli to the existing academic knowledge, the consciousness of my own opportunities as the one who steers the work has been omnipresent (cf. Spickard 2009, 993). It has included uncertainty as a part of the ethnographic research process and made use of the hermeneutical interpretative approach to the research questions. Thus, in this research task, understanding the notion of hermeneutics does not involve regarding it as a particular method, but rather as an all-embracing idea about what interpretations and understandings of ethnographic material signify. (Cf. Vikström 2005, 9) In this task the use of generally approved methods, the ethnography of religion, thematically structured in-depth interviews and participant observation, function as a shield against arbitrariness. The hermeneutical approach to the interpretation process also requires acknowledging that every method should be examined in relation to the researcher's historical and social context. (Vikström 2005, 18) Through this kind of disciplined interpretation, the hermeneutical research gains validity (Illman 2007, 67).



## Methods in the Field: Ethnography, Interviews and Observation

*Mais tout est histoires, [...]... Absolument tout, et pour tout le monde...  
Seulement, on ne trouve jamais personne pour les écouter...  
(Gavalda 2008, 481)*

### A Hermeneutical Ethnography of Religion

In the field of religious studies, an anthropological approach has often been applied in ethnographic accounts. Finland has its own long tradition of ethnography among Muslims. Many scholars of comparative religion have also recently published various ethnographic studies and ethnography has been used, for example as a research approach or a part of the research material, in several dissertations (cf. Opas 2008; Granholm 2005; Illman 2004; Martikainen 2004; Tiilikainen 2003). Currently the popularity of ethnography tends to increase, as the benefits and a range of possibilities it offers to unite the ethnographic approach with different types of research have become more acknowledged. (Opas 2004, 163 and 165–166; Spickard 2009, 987)

An ethnography of religion can be discerned in the methodological choices and in the chosen positioning of this study. In the field of comparative religion, this implies that one does not strive for exclusive research approaches, but instead ones which overlap. In this process, theoretical and methodological components mould into something that allows the ethnography of religion to emerge. (Opas 2004, 174) Ethnography can be divided roughly into two areas: field research and ethnographic writing (Opas 2004, 155). Ethnographic fieldwork is realized in engagement with the everyday lived realities of the field (Harvey 2004, 169). My aim was to familiarize myself with the field, observe it and learn from it. I could use several methods for this purpose, of which I had chosen thematically structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation. (Cf. Spickard 2009, 987; Vuorinen 2005, 63) My time in the field could be described as a series of short-term stays. In 2008 and 2009, my field trips totaled approximately five months. I stayed mainly near the capital area (Skopje), but made sev-

eral shorter and longer visits to other parts of the country, for example to the cities of Gevgelija, Gostivar, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Tetovo, Štip, Struga and villages of Negotina, Raven and Shipkovica. With the aid of this fieldwork, I aimed to deepen my understanding as I interpreted and analyzed the material and the results – both during the stay in the Republic of Macedonia, as well as afterwards when writing up the account (cf. Seidman 1998, 110; Vuorinen 2005, 63). That is, my function as a researcher was that of a mediator, or an interpreter, between the field and the research results (cf. Opas 2008, 18; Spickard 2009, 987; Vuorinen 2005, 63).

My ethnographic writing consisted of observing and making notes during the course of concrete stays in the field, of interpreting this gathered material, and producing writing based on these experiences (cf. Opas 2004, 155). Ethnographic research has a unique character every time it is carried out because of the variables encountered and choices the researcher makes in the course of it. Therefore, it may be justified to speak about *ethnographies* instead of *ethnography*. (Opas 2004, 156) In my research these ethnographies could be seen to be emerging also as a result of the multilayered nature of the field. In order to contextualize the individuals under study, my work was simultaneously focused on women, the Muslim community, the Albanian community and the Macedonian society, as well as all the groups the latter consisted of. These ethnographies were marked by interaction between the researcher and the informant(s) in all of the many-sided and continuously transforming phases of the research, and they impacted also on the writing processes. (Cf. Opas 2004, 156)

For me it was important to acknowledge the positioning of the researcher with its emotional, value-laden and historically formed aspects. This signified that all participants in the research process should have felt able to preserve their own situational context also when the power relations, which were actualized in every meeting I had with them, were problematized and made distinct. (Cf. Illman 2007, 62) For example in such situations in which I discussed with the interviewees how I was going to use and archive the material. While following the footsteps of Ruth Behar, I made the choice to do and write my ethnography vulnerably, without denying my evident emotional involvement, and also exposing my person in both: in the fieldwork and in the process of interpreting the material. Through this choice I hope that also the answers given to me in the course of the fieldwork have been, reciprocally, vulnerable. (Cf. Behar 1996, 16) This invitation to vulnerability involves also the readers of this account (cf.

Davidman 2002, 26). With vulnerability I do not mean that anything personal should be added in the ethnographic writing, but rather as Behar expresses it: 'The exposure of the self [vulnerability] [...] has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake' (Behar 1996, 14; cf. Spickard and Landers 2002, 13).

Also Charlotte Aull Davies emphasizes that one's aim should not be to primarily report on individual experiences and not to lose sight of the researcher's responsibility to seek explanatory abstraction (Davies 2008, 26; cf. McCarthy Brown 2002, 133). In this way, what appears to be a distance taking from science can actually be a sign of increased commitment to it (Spickard 2002, 248). These are alignments that I have aimed at preserving in my work. During the whole research process, the interaction between the informants and me was constantly defined and re-defined by my person, the informants, the field, the material and the research community. With the help of internalizing an open, or even vulnerable, way of positioning, the interviewees and me together could create an entity, a description, of the topics we were treating. Therefore, doing ethnography in this research context could be understood as a certain kind of mutual understanding that has been achieved through mutual negotiation. (Cf. Opas 2004, 175)

Because ethnography is not a static method of gathering material, but rather a number of diversified and dynamic of research approaches, the meanings of self-reflection and reflection permeate the research process and assume a variety of forms. This is because the relationship between the researcher and researched is often intimate, long-term and multi-stranded. (Davies 2008, 3–4 and 7; Opas 2008, 18; Opas 2004, 175) This open reflection, *reflexivity*, aims making the choices made in the course of the research obvious to the readers and can therefore be an important ethical choice (Opas 2008, 18). It also demonstrates how my person affects the products of research and the process of doing research itself (Davies 2008, 4; Spickard 2009, 993; Tweed 2002, 73). Guided by reflexivity I have striven for a deeper understanding of Islam in different contexts and aimed at describing and explaining the place and meanings it had for the identity construction of the Albanian women.

The ethnography of religion was a practical methodological choice for studying Albanian women's religiosity and their identities, as it is a qualitative method that aims at studying communities' cultural structures. It also rendered possible an inclusion of careful observation

of the field and gathering of interview data with the aim of creating an understanding of Albanian women's Islamic religiosities and what kind of emphasis Islam had in their identity construction, while at all times acknowledging the positioning of the researcher and the informants. The importance of understanding the context of the field, which significantly determined both the causes and effects of all aspects of human behaviour, was according to my estimation crucial for the realization of the study. The methods that I used in the fieldwork consisted of a mixture of being pragmatic and having lots of good luck. Even though the governing principle in designing interviews would preferably be to strive for a rational process that is both repeatable and documentable, I often worked in circumstances in which ideal conditions were not fulfilled. But as Irving Seidman argues: 'It is almost always better to conduct an interview under less than ideal conditions than not to conduct one at all' (Seidman 1998, 16). Also, without something to listen to, there would be nothing to interpret or to speak about that could then be exposed to criticism (Vikström 2005, 27).

### **The Field: 'Shteti i varfër me zemrën e madhe', a Poor State with a Big Heart<sup>79</sup>**

In this subsection I describe in more detail the concrete circumstances in the field and the gathered material. After some time in the field it became clear to me that organizing appointments with women and an interpreter without a local 'contact person' between us, was often a laborious task to perform. Also my wish to get to know the informants first, at least a little, before conducting the interview, was not possible to realize at all times. Therefore I aimed at contextualizing the interviews externally through observing the Macedonian everyday reality and getting more familiar with it directly by myself. The constantly changing societal and social circumstances (e.g. political incidents, election terms, demonstrations, tensions between different groups, the arbitrary behaviour of the contact persons' employers), language barriers and unexpected events that might have occurred in family relationships (e.g. funerals, weddings, sickness, guests) made me cancel many prearranged appointments or just to give up on some ideas that were ultimately too complicated to be realized, such as my attempts

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<sup>79</sup> This is how one person I met in my fieldwork, described the Republic of Macedonia in Albanian. Also Thiessen's informants speak about the Southern Europe, and the Republic of Macedonia, as a 'Europe with a heart', which has greater morality and less crime due to the socialist past and compassion. (Thiessen 2010, 51)

to visit Albanian villages in the aim of interviewing or to interview a woman from a Salafi group.

Sometimes people also just changed their minds about the interview or about providing the help they had promised, which they of course had every right to do. One aspect was also a kind of 'local way of functioning', which a local friend of mine described as 'hot-hot-hot-cold-cold-cold'. With this expression he referred to the relatively quick loss of interest that people could from time to time show towards new things or issues that required a slightly longer period of commitment, such as my fieldwork and interviewing sometimes could be taken for. However, as Seidman points out self-selectiveness is anyway a part of the process in an interview study, as the interviewees must agree to be interviewed (Seidman 1998, 44). I wanted to be very sure about the issue of voluntary participation. Only in one of the interviews did I experience slight doubts concerning this, but it remained impossible to draw any clear conclusions. Despite some dead ends there always seemed to be something or somebody that would take me further in the research project. As an entity it truly is made up of mosaic-like pieces that were put in their places thanks to many, many personalities.

My wishes to observe and map the situation more widely within the country was a challenge, as I did not have my own vehicle and was not so enthusiastic about participating in the local traffic as a driver. When moving from city to city, which in general happened by bus or in a friend's car, it was of interest to know someone in the new location in order to be able to take the project further. In the end, four contact persons turned out to be especially precious and with their help I finally managed to gather more than satisfying interview material for the study. All of these contacts were people who took serious initiatives to help me and introduced me to other people. They were also visibly happy to know that this kind of research was being conducted in their country.

During my visits I got to share a lot of different things with the Albanian women I met. I was invited to several houses, took part in various events, religious and non-religious, and I certainly had a lot of coffee. I participated, for instance, in the birthday celebrations of Imam 'Ali (organized by the Bektashi tarikat) and that of the Prophet Muhammad (organized by a civil society organization with Islamic values), as well as an evening event organized only for women about the worsening situation in Gaza (organized by several civil society

organizations with Islamic values). A Skopje book fair, where a number of publishing houses with religious orientations were present, was also an interesting experience. I familiarized myself with different civil society organizations and the premises of different religious communities (for example their faculties, churches, mosques, tekkes, a medrese and a synagogue). I had opportunities to be present at diverse occasions in public and private spaces, both with women only and in mixed company, sharing the experiences of everyday life. Thus, I aimed at understanding people's lives in a way encouraged by Verkuyten:

*[I]t is necessary to be involved with and to be sensitive to the lives of those that are studied. In order to find out what concerns and preoccupies people, what their life looks like, and how they see themselves and others, it is important to gain in-depth knowledge of their world. (Verkuyten 2006, 34)*

Even though I studied one particular group of people, I did not consider them to be typical representatives of one particular region or state. Instead they represented themselves as individuals when sharing from their own opinions, experiences and values with me. (Cf. Hågström and Marander-Eklund 2005, 11) To estimate the representativity of the number of informants two criteria can be used: sufficiency and saturation. Saturation became manifest in the course of my study when the same information was given to me several times. Sufficiency refers to the variation in the range of participants that would make it possible for others outside the interview sample to connect to the experiences of the participants. (Cf. Seidman 1998, 47–48) My attempts to demonstrate the various forms of diversity, but also the similar opinions held and developments experienced by the interviewees, may help to find these connections in my analyses.

The practical exigencies have been a part of many of the research-related decisions that I have taken. However, I strove to balance these methodological weaknesses, such as my deficient knowledge of the Albanian language, relatively modest economic resources and limited time in the field, by using several methods for the data gathering. The study was also limited by the self-selective element of the interview method and my decision to interview only Muslim women who belonged to the Albanian-speaking population. However, the desire to gather 'purposely the widest variation of sites and people within the limits of the study', became a reality (Seidman 1998, 46). I wanted to gather a wide range of data that would reflect different aspects of the Islamic religious field in the Republic of Macedonia. My purpose was

to find out something new, more nuanced and relevant about Islamic religiosity and its implications for Albanian women's identities. Thus, I interviewed women of different ages, from different backgrounds, who lived in different places, had different social statuses, levels of education and ways of orienting themselves towards Islam. Due to the fact that I conducted this study alone, it was necessary to limit the research task geographically. I am aware that this can raise questions concerning the possibilities to make generalizations about the religiosities and identities of the Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia based on my material (cf. Repstad 1999, 24–25). However, to produce generalizations was not in the aim of this qualitative study, as its focus lies in exploring and arguing the possibilities of connecting with individual experiences.

### **Finding the Women**

When I left for the field of study for the first time I had on me only some telephone numbers and the address book of the religious communities in the Republic of Macedonia that one of the non-governmental organizations in the country had send me. Initially I contacted, telephoned and sent emails to non-governmental civil society organizations which guided me further, as well as to ecumenically and inter-religiously active people. In the field I also spoke about my project in general to a large variety of different people, from diverse contexts, who I met mainly through the friendly people who accommodated me in Skopje during most of my stays. Once I also visited the South East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo to talk about my project to the students in order to find informants, possible further contact persons and friends. I also initiated contacts with the most important Muslim communities in the country. Over time this evolved into a sort of network of contact persons located mainly in the largest cities of the western parts of the country, where most of the Albanian population lives.

The task of finding women who were willing to share their experiences of religious life with me occasionally turned out to be a challenge and I used a lot of time to visit different places and events just in order to allow people know me, who I was and why I was doing what I was doing. Some positioned themselves more carefully towards me than others. Obviously, the global tensions between the Islamic and the 'Western' world as well as tensions within both the Balkan and the Macedonian context (meaning here ethnic and religious as well as 'East' vs. 'West' antagonisms) had an impact on these reactions to me and my research task and I was very often asked about my own religious conviction and my views on Islam. Also, it was frequently, but not always, hard work to find contacts to the Albanian population through Macedonian (Slavic) people. My personal interest and choices in conducting a study of this kind preoccupied many of the people who I met in the field, in the same way as the questions related to who was financing this type of research. Also, how I was received was influenced by the consciousness or expectations the people seemed to have concerning my background, national origin, level of education, and political opinions, as well as what kind of effect these factors might have on how I perceived the things and the people I encountered in the Macedonian context (cf. Lory 1996, 115; McGuire 2002b, 200).

I agree with Pål Repstad who argues that how you are perceived depends not only on what you say or do, but also on whom you are seen with and how you position yourself and behave (Repstad 1999, 35). As many of the contacts I created had an informal nature, my personal contacts/relationships seemed to weigh in to a certain degree in the research process (cf. Repstad 1999, 38). My topic was several times revealed to be even more sensitive and difficult to access than I had expected, and my research aims were sometimes misunderstood; for instance they were sometimes interpreted as attempts to gather information about other things, such as women's rights. Also, it often seemed that everybody had an opinion about my topic regardless of one's own ethnic and religious background or gender.

I met the women who chose to be a part of my study through different contacts persons, places and friends. As for the type of data I gathered, it can be mentioned that all of the interviewees seemed to have a relatively positive image of Islam and of their own religiosity as well as an easily expressed will to speak about these matters, which may imply that the gathered data would be slanted towards a generally more favourable view of religion than another average quota. Nonetheless,



these women also expressed their dissatisfaction concerning some aspects related to religious practices and religious life in the Republic of Macedonia and described personal interpretations and choices regarding religious matters, which did not at all times follow what might be considered as normative. This ease with which the women were able to speak about these issues could also be understood as a sign of their openness and/or the trust they felt in the interview situations. I could distinguish particularly three reasons for why the women wanted to be a part of my research project. Firstly, they found that Islam in general, globally, was misunderstood as a religion, and they wanted to make a contribution to redress this picture. Secondly, they were mainly satisfied with the religious aspect in their lives and wished to share this experience. Thirdly, they wanted to express their own opinions and views concerning religious and other issues. As Albanian women, the interviewees might also have had a desire to set the record straight on general conceptions they felt people had regarding their lives

I present now in more detail the women who gave of their time for this study and were interviewed. A recapitulatory table concerning the women can be found at the end of this subsection. I also interviewed three other people from different Islamic communities, to whom I refer to as reference persons in the text (Interviews 10–12). They gave me valuable information regarding Islam in the Republic of Macedonia. All my nineteen female informants were, at the moment I interviewed them, living in the northern and western parts of the Republic of Macedonia, in areas inhabited predominantly by the Albanian-speaking population (see Appendix IV for demographic maps). The interviews took place mainly in the capital, Skopje, in the city of Gostivar and in the areas surrounding them. Seven of my informants were born in the city of Skopje and three of them in the villages in the capital area. There were also women born in other Macedonian cities such as Bitola, Debar, Struga and Tetovo. One of them was born in the village of Strajan and another in the village of Arachinovo. Two women were born abroad (however within the former SFRY<sup>80</sup>) and one did not state her place of birth.

At the time of the interviews ten of the women were living in cities and nine of them in villages. The informants were predominantly living in the capital area (13); 5 of these 13 lived in the villages nearby Skopje, others in the city proper. Two women lived in other Macedo-

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<sup>80</sup> The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

nian cities, one in Tetovo and other remained undefined (most probably in Gostivar or in Tetovo) and four of them in the villages<sup>81</sup> of Llakavica, Raven and Strajan. In my quota the demographic structure of the population became apparent in the sense that a large part of the population in the Republic of Macedonia is concentrated in the capital area and its proximity. It is even stated that half of the Macedonian population lives in Skopje or in its surroundings. There is an important concentration of Albanians in the capital area and Albanian is a language with official status in the department of Skopje. Generally speaking the Macedonian population is highly urbanized: it is claimed that from 59% (State Statistical Office c) to 67% (Balkan Insight 2010) lives in the cities.

Of the women interviewed Fatima was a twenty-four-year-old student, to whom I spoke with assistance from an interpreter. She, like Amina, Miriam, Mahabba, Nuriya, Aisha, Hawwa and Farah, was found through a contact person who introduced a local NGO and its female members to me. Fatima was born in the city, but lived at the time of the interview in a village. She studied for a degree at university and was one of the three children in a five-member family. Both of Fatima's parents worked and they had prioritized, despite their economic difficulties, the education of their children. Fatima felt that her parents had given her advice and help in life. The economic situation of the family was, according to her estimation, below satisfactory. At the time of the interview Fatima was married. She considered her family to be religious and that she herself was best described as a Muslim, a believer, a Muslim following the Hanafi school of law and a seeker of truth. Islam in her life meant spiritual, existential, convictional and moral values and elements, as well as moral conviction.

Amina was twenty-three-year-old university student who was born and lived in a village. I interviewed Amina with the help of an interpreter. Amina had had a happy childhood in a family of four members. Both of her parents worked and Amina described the economic situation of the family as good. She assessed her family to be a religious one. Amina described herself as a Muslim, a believer, a religious and spiritual person, religiously liberal and a seeker of truth. For

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<sup>81</sup> The distances between different modes of habitation are relatively short in the Republic of Macedonia. The villages may be very close to cities and people who live in the villages may work or study in a city. Thus, living in a village environment does not at all times comprehensively describe and explain the social sphere of the women I interviewed.

her the important things in life were health, friends and friendship, faith and religion. Amina highlighted the meaning of freedom in her religious life: she thought that being a Muslim woman offered her a chance to be free, as she as a Muslim had everything else available for her. Amina had received a religious education previously at mekteb and was nowadays attending classes given by an imam. Regarding religious literature she mentioned that the Qur'an was the basis for everything and from it according to Amina derived also the other texts. She described Islam in her life as related to spiritual, religious, existential, convictional and moral elements and moral values, as well as life values.

Like Fatima and Amina, twenty-three-year old Miriam studied at university. I interviewed Miriam with assistance from an interpreter. Miriam was born and lived in the city and was part of a family that had five members: three children and the parents. She said that her childhood had been a very happy period in her life. The economic situation of her family was according to Miriam good and she considered her family to be religious. Miriam described herself as a Muslim, believer and a Muslim who belonged to the Hanafi school of law. For Miriam religion meant spiritual and religious elements and values in her life as well as life values.

The twenty-four-year-old Mahabba was born and lived in a village. She was studying for a university degree and considered the economic situation of her family to be good. I spoke to Mahabba through an interpreter. Mahabba regarded her childhood as happy and carefree. She described her family as religious and herself as a Muslim and believer. As the most important things in her life Mahabba mentioned faith, love and mercy. Islam as an element in her life was best described as religious values and a spiritual conviction. Mahabba had not attended in any form of religious education, but she read religious literature.

Nuriya was a twenty-two-year-old university student, whom I interviewed with the help of an interpreter. She was born and lived in a village. Nuriya estimated that the economic situation of her family was satisfactory. The family had eight members, comprising grandparents, parents and three siblings in addition to Nuriya. Nuriya's mother was a housewife and her father worked. Her childhood memories were happy. Nuriya said her family was very religious and considered herself to be a Muslim, a believer, a Muslim of the Hanafi school of law, a religious and a spiritual person as well as a seeker of truth. The important things in her life were her belief in God, her parents and

her boyfriend. Nuriya had not received a religious education. She did, however, read religious literature. Religion in Nuriya's life meant for her religious and existential elements as well as moral and spiritual convictions.

Aisha was a twenty-five-year-old university student, who was born and lived in the city. I interviewed her with the help of an interpreter. In Aisha's family her father worked and mother was a housewife. The family had six members: parents and four children. Until now only Aisha studied at university as the others were still in high school. She described her family as religious and considered the economic situation of the family to be good. At the time of the interview Aisha considered that the most important things in her life were that she knew Allah as God, Muhammad as His last Prophet and that she belonged to Islam. Aisha estimated that the concepts that described her best religiously; were being a Muslim, a believer and a spiritual person. She had not received a religious education. She, however, mentioned her participation in *dars* and her lecture of religious literature. Islam for Aisha meant spiritual and religious values and spiritual conviction.

Hawwa was a twenty-two-year-old university student, who I spoke to with the help of an interpreter. She was born and lived in the city. Hawwa thought that she had amazing parents, who at all times had taken care of her and her two siblings. Hawwa considered the relationships in her family to be open and sincere and she said that her childhood had been the most beautiful period of her life. The economic situation of the family was good and Hawwa described her family as a religious one. The most significant things in Hawwa's life were her family, praying and believing. She had participated in *dars* and also received guidance in reading of the Qur'an from a person who had conducted *hatme*. Hawwa saw herself as a Muslim and described Islam as an element in her life in terms of spiritual, religious, existential, convictional and moral values as well as life values, religious, moral and spiritual convictions.

Sabah was a thirty-nine-year-old housewife who was born in a village, but lived in the city. I found Sabah through one contact person and interviewed her with the help of an interpreter. Sabah had graduated from the high school and had been a daughter in a family that had seven members. She was married and had children herself. Sabah considered the economic situation of the family to be satisfactory and described her family as religious. The most significant things in Sabah's life were health, the financial situation and family. Sabah had

participated in religious education at her mosque for five years, but she had not attended the classes very regularly. She described herself as a Muslim and Islam meant for her a spiritual conviction.

Khadija had a Sunni background, but had become a member of the Bektashi tarikat. She described herself as a mystic, religious and spiritual person. I spoke to Khadija through an interpreter and she was introduced to me by a contact person from one religious community. She was a fifty-three-year-old housewife with elementary schooling, who was born and lived in a village. She was from a family of five members – three children and their parents. Nowadays one of the children lived abroad and another sibling had already retired. Khadija was married to a Bektashi man and had children. She considered her family's economic situation to be good. Khadija estimated that her family was very religious. For her the important things in life were that her family was well and that she could help the tekkes and the babas. Khadija said that she was continuously learning about religion. Two or three times a week she had the possibility to meet with the baba and be taught directly by him. Khadija also read literature on religion. Islam as an element in Khadija's life was primarily a spiritual matter, in her view: if the spiritual part was fulfilled, everything else followed it.

The twenty-two-year-old Farah, who studied at university was born and lived in the city. I interviewed Farah in English. Her family numbered six members and Farah thought it was wonderful to have a big family. Farah's father worked and her mother was a housewife. Her family had satisfactory economic situation and Farah described her family as religious. For Farah, the most important things in life were health, her family and love. Farah saw herself as a Muslim, a believer and a religious person. She had previously been educated in how to read the Qur'an and at the time of the interview she attended the dars given by an imam once a week. Islam in her life meant spiritual elements and values, life values, as well as having a religious and moral conviction.

The thirty-five-year-old Amala was born in the city, but lived at the time of the interview in a village. I came into contact with her through a contact person in a religious community and spoke to her with the help of an interpreter. Amala was married and had children. She was satisfied with the economic situation of her family. Amala considered her family not to be so inclined towards religious issues. She had only good memories of her childhood, had graduated from the university

and was active in working life. In her view the most important things in life were children and family. Amala had not received a religious education, but occasionally read religious literature. She saw religion as an important factor in life, but not as a necessity. She had a mixed religious background and described herself as religiously liberal. To her religion meant having spiritual values in her life.

Wafa was from a Sunni family, was married to a Bektashi man and had children. I spoke to her with the help of an interpreter and found her through a contact person in a religious community. Thirty-one-year-old Wafa was born in another city within the former SFRY and lived nowadays in a Macedonian village. Wafa considered the economic situation of the family to be good and described her family as religious. Wafa had graduated from high school and was active in working life. She described herself as a Muslim, a believer and a spiritual person. To her the central issues in life were the economic situation, happiness and religion. She appreciated both being a woman and being a Muslim without any preferences. Wafa stated that she had studied the entire Qur'an at the mosque and was familiar with the Bible to some extent as well. Nowadays she was more familiar with the Bektashi tradition. Wafa occasionally read religious literature and stated furthermore that regarding many issues she had a lot of books at home and was knowledgeable about many things. For Wafa Islam meant having spiritual and moral values.

Zahra, who had a mixed religious background, described herself as a spiritual person and a believer. I came into contact with her through a contact person in a religious community and interviewed her in English. A fifty-nine-year-old housewife living in a village environment, Zahra considered the economic situation of her family to be satisfactory. She was married and had grown-up children. Her family occupied an important place in Zahra's life, as she mentioned the three most important things in life being her children, grandchildren and husband. Zahra had finished high school, was born in another former Yugoslav Republic outside the Republic of Macedonia and had also lived in some other countries during her lifetime. She estimated that Islam was for her an important focus of interest and that in her family belief in God was central. She had not received a religious education. Zahra described religion in her life in terms of spiritual elements and moral values.

Nawal was a thirty-five-year-old woman, who had an active working life and also studied at university. I interviewed Nawal in English and

met her through a contact person in a religious community. Nawal was born and lived in the city. She told that she was happily married, had children and the family had a good economic situation. Nawal and her husband were both working. The most important things in life for Nawal were health, happiness and family. She considered that her family was religious and that she could be best described as a believer and a religiously liberal person. She had received a religious education from her parents and said that lately she had not read much religious literature. For Nawal Islam meant having life values and moral conviction.

The twenty-seven-year-old Qadr was very satisfied and happy with the position she had in her own community. I interviewed Qadr in English and made her acquaintance through a friend. She was born in the city, but lived at the time of the interview in a village. She had one sibling, considered the economic situation of the family to be satisfactory and had good childhood memories. Qadr had been married and had a daughter. The most important things for her in life were her daughter, happiness and health. She considered her family as religious and described herself as a Muslim. Qadr had a university degree and was actively working. She also had a career perspective and was involved in politics. Qadr had received a short religious education from an imam at the mosque in the village where she lived. She had attended these classes twice weekly. Qadr also read religious literature. Islam in her life was best described as having religious values and elements, life values, and moral and religious convictions.

The sixty-year-old Habiba stated that her childhood had been happy and that her parents had placed an emphasis on the importance of education. All five children of the family had received an academic education. Habiba was married to a Bektashi man and had a family of her own. I interviewed Habiba with the help of an interpreter and I found her through a friend. She described herself as a Muslim and was satisfied with the economic situation of her family, which she estimated to be a religious one. Habiba had been active in the working life, but had nowadays retired. The most important aspects in Habiba's life concerned her family, the education of her grandchildren and the unity of the family. Habiba had studied the history of religions and stated that she knew little bit about them all, even though she was mainly trying to learn about her own faith. Islam in her life meant spiritual elements and values as well as life values.

Thirty-year-old Aida had a university degree and she was working. I interviewed Aida in English and I came into contact with her through a friend. Aida was married and had a child. She was born and lived at the time of the interview in the city. She described the economic situation of her family as satisfactory and considered the family religious. The important things in Aida's life were her child, parents, health and the good situation that the family had. Religiously she saw herself as a Muslim. Aida valued above all being happy, whereafter she mentioned the importance of being a woman and a Muslim. Aida had received her religious education from her parents and read religious literature. To her Islam meant having life values as well as moral and spiritual convictions.

Hanifa was born and lived in the city. She answered my questions in English by email and I met her at an Islamic event that I participated in. Hanifa had good childhood memories. At the time of the interview, thirty-one-year-old Hanifa had a university degree, was married and had children. The economic situation of her family was less than satisfactory. She saw that her family was religious and described herself as a believer. Hanifa was satisfied with her life and said that the three most important things in it were health, the *iman* and the fact that she was alive. She had studied Islam by herself and Islam meant for her having religious, moral and spiritual convictions and life values.

Zainab was a twenty-five-year-old university student who had previously lived in a village, but moved to a city to study. I interviewed Zainab mainly in English, but had occasional help from an interpreter. I met Zainab at an Islamic event. She stated that her family lived partly from agriculture, that her father was highly educated and that all the children of the family studied. Zainab had two siblings. Education was very important in the family, whose economic situation was below satisfactory. The most important things in Zainab's life were to graduate, passing her university exams, her family and the future of her siblings. She considered her family as religious and described herself as a Muslim. Zainab had not received a religious education, but read religious literature.

The women interviewed were of ages ranging between 22 and 60 years. Those most interested in sharing of their time were the younger women: ten of them were born in the 1980s and five in the 1970s. Two women were born in the 1940s, one in the 1950s and one in the 1960s. The Macedonian population is on average slightly younger than in many other European countries, and due to this the variation in my



quota could be considered as a positive feature. Ten women were at the time of the interview studying for a university degree and five of them had already received a university diploma of some kind. One of these five had also studied at a vocational school. Three women had a high school background and one of them had studied in a vocational high school. One woman had been through an elementary school. Three of the interviewees declared the economic situation in their families to be less than satisfactory. Eight of them considered the situation satisfactory and the other eight as good. Nine women were students. Five women were active in working life and one of them had her own business. Three women were housewives and one was retired. One woman, despite her education, stayed at home due to her state of health and challenges she faced in employment as she dressed in a way that was considered to be Islamic.

Fifteen women defined their families as religious. Two of the women considered their families to be very religious, while one saw her family as not very interested in religious issues. One woman described the religiosity of her family by stating 'we believe in God'. Predominantly the women were Sunnis from the Hanafi school of law, three of them had a mixed background meaning that there were also Christian or Bektashi members within the closest family<sup>82</sup>. Two of them came from a Sunni family, but had discovered the Bektashi path later in their lives. In this recapitulatory table (Table 1.) I provide background details of the women and the pseudonyms used in this study.

*Table 1. The Women's Background Details*

Name	Age	Place of birth	Place of living	Education	Profession	Marital status	Interviewed with an interpreter
Fatima	24	city	village	studies for a university degree	student	married	X

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<sup>82</sup> Meaning here grandparents, parents or spouse.

<b>Amina</b>	23	village	village	studies for a university degree	student	unmarried	X
<b>Miriam</b>	23	city	city	studies for a university degree	student	unmarried	X
<b>Mahabba</b>	24	village	village	studies for a university degree	student	unmarried	X
<b>Nuriya</b>	22	village	village	studies for a university degree	student	unmarried	X
<b>Aisha</b>	25	city	city	studies for a university degree	student	unmarried	X
<b>Hawwa</b>	22	city	city	studies for a university degree	student	unmarried	X
<b>Sabah</b>	39	village	city	high school	housewife	married	X
<b>Khadija</b>	53	village	village	elementary school	housewife	married	X
<b>Farah</b>	22	city	city	studies for a university degree	student	unmarried	

<b>Amala</b>	35	city	village	uni- versity degree	employ- ee	mar- ried	X
<b>Wafa</b>	31	city within the former SFRY	village	high school	entrepre- neur	mar- ried	X
<b>Zahra</b>	59	city within the former SFRY	village	high school	house- wife	mar- ried	
<b>Nawal</b>	35	city	city	studies for a uni- versity degree	employ- ee	mar- ried	
<b>Qadr</b>	27	city	village	uni- versity degree	employ- ee	di- vorced	
<b>Habiba</b>	60	city	city	uni- versity degree, voca- tional school	retired	mar- ried	X
<b>Aida</b>	30	city	city	uni- versity degree	employ- ee	mar- ried	
<b>Hanifa</b>	31	city	city	uni- versity degree	unem- ployed	mar- ried	
<b>Zainab</b>	25	city	city	studies for a uni- versity degree	student	mar- ried	X

### Interviews and Participant Observation

For my work the thematically structured in-depth interviews and different levels of participant observation as ethnographic research methods were the most accessible alternatives. My thought was that interviewing as a method to gather material about personal topics, such as individual religiosity, could render possible a closer contact with the interviewees. My aims were to gather detailed and accurate information about Muslim women's religiosity and how Islam was meaningful for their identities. This form of combining of different methods often gives a wider foundation to base the data on and a safer ground for interpreting it (cf. Repstad 1999, 21). The data collection for this study included relatively structured means in the form of interviews and more unstructured means as for the observation of the field. As a result, I received both narrative (field diary, interviews) and numerical data (one part of the interviews, statistics). The quantity of the latter remains modest in my own material, but I was kindly provided with more statistics by the State Statistical Office.

To create meaning is to place behaviour in a context and interviewing as a method made this kind of observations accessible to me. It gave me opportunities to attempt to understand the actions of the women and the meanings given to them; the subjective understandings the individuals had of particular actions. (Cf. Seidman 1998, 4) Because I had the opportunity to work concretely with people, I could form a direct contact with the interview material and the field itself. Using interviews as the core of empirical material produces subjective and synthetic results, borne of intersubjective involvement (cf. Illman 2004, 39). In my work I strove to use the definitions and reactions of the people themselves as sources from which to derive meaning (cf. Verkuyten 2006, 35).

Human beings render their world comprehensible through producing meanings and in this study this comprehension is predominantly narrative (cf. Sintonen 1999, 43). For my study the narrativity of experiences was of key significance as narratives of different kinds shaped not just the interviews, but also the view I had of the field. I experienced the field and achieved understanding concerning it not only directly myself, but also through people's narrative accounts. This 'storytelling' could be seen as a meaning-making process, which made people reflect on their experiences. When telling stories, people

selected constitutive details out of their experiences before arranging them and giving them an order, and thereby a meaning. (Cf. Seidman 1998, 1) In order to understand the identity construction of the women I aimed at listening to their stories with all their dynamic complexity illustrated often with accounts of social contexts and social relationships, and then 'situating them in the multiple relational and institutional contexts' in which the people lived their lives (Ammerman 2003, 224; Day 2009, 268). And as I could observe in my work, these experiences evidently varied between different persons and in different contexts. In that sense each experience was unique, although there were similarities between them too. (Verkuyten 2006, 34)

The interviews functioned as my main source of material and I worked predominantly, in 15 interviews, with an interpreter to complete this task. The working languages were in most of the cases Albanian and English; when needed some Slovenian and Macedonian were used as auxiliary languages. Altogether I interviewed in person 18 women. Due to some technical difficulties I had in the end sixteen and half of these interviews on tape. One of the women answered the questions in English by email. In order to try to map the nature of the Islamic presence in the Republic of Macedonia and issues related to the role of women in the Muslim community I interviewed three additional informants, whom I call reference persons<sup>83</sup> in my text. Two of these interviews were conducted with an interpreter and one in English.

The average length of the interviews with the women was about 1 hour and 30 minutes when carried out through an interpreter. The interviews with the women made in English, which were six in number, lasted about an hour each. Other informants shared with me about 30 minutes of their time each. The questionnaire used for this purpose consisted of eight pages and its themes were divided across five main categories.<sup>84</sup> In the course of the fieldwork I developed the questions into a more consistent and thematically more rigorously organized questionnaire, which I used in the majority of the interviews.<sup>85</sup> This

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<sup>83</sup> I do not give any further details regarding these persons in order to protect their anonymity. All of them have a high and respected status in their communities.

<sup>84</sup> These were (1) religion and you, (2) religion and community, (3) religion and society, (4) religion and the global context and (5) some theological and dogmatic reflections.

<sup>85</sup> For instance, I organized the questions in themes, rectified grammatical mistakes and mistakes in translations as well as left out some questions that caused confusion.

was due to the opportunities I had had to familiarize myself with the informants' reactions to the questions, leading me to an attempt to adapt myself better to the situation. The questionnaire is attached here as Appendix III. I would say that the depth of my in-depth interviews was based on the chosen research theme and theory, as well as contextualization. To some extent also the breadth of the different themes treated could be seen as linked to the depth of the interviews. In addition, my position as a researcher coming from 'outside' had an impact on the material I gathered; sometimes it might have been easier to talk to me than for instance to somebody who belongs to the Albanian community, or is from the Republic of Macedonia. Or it could be the complete opposite; people might think that talking to me should be done with outmost carefulness, because I as an outsider could not possibly 'get it'. When aiming for depth I was limited, in addition to time and economic resources, by the different factors which constituted the context of the interview situation, as well as the dynamics of the interaction between the interviewee, the interpreter and me.

As questionnaires and interviews are discrete methods which can be used so that they overlap and support each other (Hägström and Marander-Eklund 2005, 16–17), I used the first two pages of the questionnaire to gather some general information about the backgrounds of the interviewees. The women predominantly filled this part by themselves and this method of gathering information was relatively satisfying, as I could not, as I mentioned, always acquaint myself with the interviewee before hand. The latter part of the interview was realized predominantly in Albanian, which was the mother tongue of the informants.<sup>86</sup> The interpreter posed the question in Albanian and the interviewee answered in her mother tongue. The answer was then translated to me in English and I could, if I wanted to, ask more questions in order to receive more detailed information. In the interviews conducted in English probably a more direct connection between the informant and me was formed. My original aim was to work with one interpreter with whom I could travel to different destinations and carry out the interviews. Mainly due to the limited economic resources I was prevented from following this initial idea. The availability of an interpreter influenced sometimes even my chances to con-

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<sup>86</sup> In the interviews that I conducted with other informants than women, I used sometimes a slightly different approach. I posed the questions in English and the questions were translated into the mother tongue of the interviewed person and after s/he had answered the answers were then translated to me in English. One of these informants also had another mother tongue than Albanian.

duct interviews in certain occasions. Being assisted by the kind and helpful people I met in the course of the fieldwork, I decided to work with several different persons who helped me in this translation task, which was of crucial importance.

Of all the interviews (of which there are altogether 22, including those with other informants than the women), I had the results of seven in English. In some cases some people in the interview location could function as 'linguistic support'. In the transliterations I mention them as interpreters. I worked with interpreters in 15 interviews and altogether I was assisted by six different people in this interpretation task. Four of them were men and two were women. A seventh person translated the questionnaire itself from English to Albanian. The presence of the interpreters was an inherent part of the interview situation and sometimes led to confusion. The schedules of the interpreters, their opportunities to leave their family context and be available, when I needed them as well as how extensive their vocabulary was, was all a part of the work. Also, because the interpreters were present in the interview situation, they introduced a new element that combined with the interaction I had with the person I was interviewing. In most of the cases, the interpreter was known to the interviewee, which in a way made the communication easier, but could also lead to situations where I could detect that there was maybe too much insisting or facilitation in the air. The interpreters also had their own impressions of my work, topic and person, which from my point of view occasionally affected their ways of working in a positive as well as in a negative sense. My aim to listen to the interviewees speak as freely as possible was difficult to realize when I was not working 'only' with the interviewee. I also had to introduce my work and myself many times due to the fact that I worked with many people. In this way the interpreters functioned as the access to, but also as the filter between me and the interview material (cf. Repstad 1999, 35).

The contemporary trend in research tends to strive for more detailed and descriptive information concerning the context in which the research has taken place, as more importance is being attached to personal and subjective experiences (Henriksson 2004, 24). The method of in-depth interviewing offered me the chance to bring out these people's personal stories in an enriching manner, which revealed each person to be interesting no matter how anonymous s/he might be (cf.

Seidman 1998, 47). All the interviews conducted and the situations in which they were realized were inherently unique. The interviews took place in a variety of locations and times. Eight of them were conducted at the premises of a non-governmental organisation, five of them in the houses of the informants, three at their workplaces, one in a cafeteria and another in a beauty salon. Due to the changes in location and the possibilities that the local population had different understandings of social space and of the nature of a research interview<sup>87</sup>, the interview situations varied greatly. Generally, I aimed at interviewing one person a day, but I also adapted to the circumstances and, if necessary, interviewed up to four women on the same day. Most of the interviews took place during the daytime, two closer to midnight and one of them was done in two parts.

In my work, I aimed at minimizing the effect my person and the interview situation had on the participants when they reconstructed their personal experiences. Despite these attempts, I as an interviewer, even though often working with an interpreter, was admittedly a part of the interviewing picture as I had formulated the questions, was present in the situation itself, sometimes answered the questions of the informants and even occasionally shared my own experiences and used examples close to my own life experience to explain the questions. Also, the knowledge and abilities I had at my disposal to express and explain myself in English certainly influenced the outcome of the research. (Cf. Seidman 1998, 16) As for other challenges in the communication processes, the interviewed persons could also skip questions, forget to answer something or misunderstand the meaning of the question. In addition, when I interviewed them in English, they communicated in a language different from their mother tongue. Therefore, I agree with Marja Tiilikainen, who notes that such aspects inherently influence the quality of the gathered material, and particularly its depth and quality. Nonetheless, she considers that this has not had an impact on the reliability of the material, which is a point

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<sup>87</sup> By this I mean that the space where the interviews took place was not at all times reserved only for that purpose, in which case the situation would have been calm and set apart for the interview. Rather other people might have entered the space, or the interview might have taken place in a context that was shared with other people. Also, the respect and hospitality showed towards elderly people, other family members, guests and friends (for example greeting etc.) sometimes interrupted the interview. In addition, the ideas people seemed to have of scientific research were of a varied nature and influenced the circumstances and the space they made available for it.



of view that I also share and base on my own field experiences. (Cf. Tiilikainen 2003, 108)

What the women considered important, essential and worth mentioning concerning their cultural and religious traditions varied and this could complicate my task. Therefore it could sometimes be useful to ask about the same topics in slightly different words. The informants could also be surprised at the knowledge I displayed on the theme we were treating together. Occasionally, on the contrary, they seemed to have expected that I already knew all the facts, or conversely that I knew nothing at all. These suppositions influenced the content of the answers. How I was received depended to a great extent on the contexts. Some of the women were confused because this was the first scientific study they participated in. Some were tired after the day's work and some maybe even suspicious about a study that aimed at understanding a topic that was so personal and delicate. Some women hesitated to answer the questions, as they were afraid of not having sufficient theological, dogmatic and doctrinal knowledge. The majority of the reactions directed towards me as a researcher were positive. The women and other people I worked with often showed a high level of curiosity about my work and seemed pleased to realize that they were at the centre of my interest.

Religious fields often tend to be male-dominated and this is the case also in the Republic of Macedonia within most of its religious organizational structures. I would however estimate that my gender was a favourable element in the realization of my study. It often seemed that people could speak to me relatively unreservedly, almost about anything, regardless of their gender. This can maybe be explained by my 'foreign, European' identity, which might have taken some attention away from other aspects of my person (cf. Repstad 1999, 56). Features such as my age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, life experience and religious identity most certainly also had an impact on what I could learn and could have access to (cf. Spickard and Landers 2002, 6). With the Albanian women, I usually found a 'common language' rather easily and could share life experiences, when most probably aspects that culturally were more a part of men's lives remained less acknowledged to me (cf. Repstad 1999, 56; Spickard 2009, 987; Spickard and Landers 2002, 6).

I can state that switching from one role to another in the field was not always an easy task, as the contacts I had with the people changed from purely professional ones into, for example, close friendships and

could therefore involve more intense emotional experiences (cf. Karlsson Minganti 2007, 41–42; Kuula 2006, 140). Distance and impartial positioning are problematic in qualitative research and especially so if one has a personal relationship with the environment under research (Repstad 1999, 27). In informal interaction the contents of the conversations cannot be predicted (Kuula 2006, 138), and this can influence the researcher's perceptions. As Karen McCarthy Brown points out 'the ethnographic research is a social art form and a therefore subject to all the complexities and confusions of human relationships in general' (McCarthy Brown 2002, 133). To respect people's privacy and personalities while simultaneously remaining alert to the arising of possibly essential details for my research, which might appear in some surprising and unpredictable context, was sometimes demanding (cf. Ammerman 2007a, 9). I strove many times for additional awareness and self-reflection as to my positioning as a researcher and other methodological choices taken. In these I found support in Ruth Behar's views (1996), which encouraged admitting the evident, also emotional, involvement of the researcher as an observer of the field as well as being vulnerable in the ethnographic research work. Behar considers that this approach could offer new perspectives in the research and seek greater objectivity by doing science and research more subjectively. (Behar 1996, 28–29; cf. Davies 2008, 6; Harvey 2004, 175)

In the field I had the opportunity to observe daily life from a grassroots level and exchange interesting thoughts and ideas with a wide variety of people. Due to the fact that my language skills<sup>88</sup> did not make it possible to follow up everything around me, I sought to deepen my understanding of the unknown reality within these limits. Naturally, the various dimensions of Macedonian societal life became more accessible to me when I was assisted by somebody, often an interpreter, a contact person or a friend, with whom I shared a common language. To some extent I was capable of getting an idea of the local events and everyday life also from the local Albanian newspapers with the help of a dictionary, or by following up the Balkan news portals in French or English on the internet. During my visits I kept a research diary in which I discussed different elements that were related to my study and which described the circumstances in the field. The 'guesthood position' which I applied in my participant observation and which 'carries the stronger implication of a more complete,

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<sup>88</sup> I studied the Albanian language for one academic year in relatively intensive manner at L'Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris.

participative, relationship that changes people' (Harvey 2004, 176) corresponded well with hermeneutical anchoring of ethnography of religion.

Observation gave me a direct access to the social interplay around me (cf. Repstad 1999, 23). In the field I worked openly and told people who I was. However, it was evident that people occasionally did not initially know that I was a researcher. That is, I used various degrees of openness within the limits of several ethical and methodical choices. (Cf. Repstad 1999, 28–29 and 43) In the fieldwork I strove to spread my attention to all the actors present in the research field, in order to get a more precise picture of what the societal entity consisted of and what kinds of drifts were active within it (cf. Repstad 1999, 34 and 45–46). A challenge for qualitative research of this kind is that one often gathers most of the information from and in interaction with those kinds of people who do not have difficulties in expressing themselves and are willing to cooperate (Repstad 1999, 47; Spickard 2002, 250). In my field study I tried to marginalize this aspect, for example through the contacts I made with religious groups with more marginal or minority status. I also spent time with people from different contexts and with different backgrounds (for example ethnic, linguistic, religious, social) and was often assisted by somebody when I came into contact with persons with whom I did not share a common language. At the centre of my attention were those environmental characteristics that might have social consequences and therefore affect the results of the study. In this process the focal point of my research became narrower as the concrete research questions became increasingly crystallized. (Cf. Repstad 1999, 43 and 51)

To adapt the role of a passive observer in the field most likely cannot function very well in the long run in the Macedonian context. People in general were curious to meet somebody unknown to them who was interested in their society and came from abroad. I also remained convinced that these people, who offered me their time and shared pieces of their lives with me, had an indisputable right to know at least a little about who I was and where I came from. In relation to all actors in the field I was never only a researcher and they were never just the focus of the research; the interaction between us was about people who create a relation to one another, not just playing roles without a context (cf. Repstad 1999, 39). It was about finding a balance in the social interactions between the roles of researcher and the actor, while at the same time trying to preserve my impartial position, as my task was not to take anyone's side in the complex and entangled societal

context (cf. Repstad 1999, 40–41). In this process the dual nature of social research came into play: how to connect with the researched environment and people and how to preserve some degree of separation from it (Davies 2008, 11).

When making notes in the field I was aware that I could not transmit the whole picture of the surrounding reality. Of necessity some things would be filtered out and I could draw only a partial picture of the whole. (Cf. Repstad 1999, 53; Spickard 2009, 990 and 993; Vikström 2005, 59) I completely agree with Behar who considers this transmission as the most challenging part of ethnographic work; how to aptly ‘bring the ethnographic moment back, to resurrect it, to communicate the distance [...] between what we saw and heard and our inability, finally to do justice to it in our representations’ (Behar 1996, 8–9).

## **In Dialogue with the Material – Interpreting the Qualitative Material**

In this section I will continue the methodological discussion regarding the ethnographic writing process, in the course of which I have put the various pieces of the puzzle the material consists of into their places. In my analysis of the ethnographically gathered qualitative material, I have applied interpretative methods that characterize the ethnography of religion, supported by the theoretical framework. The aim of the chosen perspective is not to create statutory images or perceptions of representativity, but to *interpret* the material. These interpretations, situated ‘never nowhere in particular or everywhere at once’ (Tweed 2002, 73), have emerged in the research process, have grown and been modified when my understanding has deepened and become more nuanced. (Cf. Illman 2004, 35)

The process of interpretation should be such that it gives space to all the reasonable meanings that the material might have and one can think of. Interpretation should preferably preserve, and if possible increase, the richness of meanings that the object of interpretation has. (Vikström 2005, 119 referring to Ricœur) To interpret is a laborious path full of conflicts, which leads to application of interpretation and at this point the interpretation process ceases, at least temporarily (Vikström 2005, 119). All interpretations are not realizable in the qualitative research and its results may remain ‘only’ more or less reliable, probable and reasonable (Svanberg 2004, 15; cf. McCarthy Brown 2002, 133). The qualitative perspectives applied in this study

can render it difficult to separate methods, methodology and theoretical framework from each other. Thus, the qualitative research process can be perceived as a meaning-making process in which the pieces it consists of and the entity it forms can exist in a relational mutual harmony and gain credibility. (Cf. Illman 2004, 36; Nynäs 2001, 34)

Because the hermeneutical interpretation and analysis always take place between two variables, the *dialogue* could also be a notion of methodological importance. In a dialogic kind of way my observations, impressions and interpretations were exposed to the perspectives of other researchers as well as to material, theory and my primary value impregnated pre-understandings. This wider and conscious dialogue could contribute to more probable interpretations and refine the gained knowledge, even though it evidently implied that all the participants left their traces on it, and the dialogue process also transformed them. (Cf. Illman 2004, 36; Nynäs 2001, 22; Spickard 2002, 248–249)

All the background variables that had an impact on me as a researcher also had a role in the research process: the theories and methods chosen, the methodology, possible hypotheses and other questions that were posed within it (cf. Opas 2004, 174). As I was a part of the research process, the observer and the participant, it was important to reflect on the unique and subjective perspective that I examined my research task from. This approach, and the context, had an impact on the interpretation conceived (Illman 2004, 38), as interpretation is 'contextually colored' and does not occur in unbiased way (Vikström 2005, 21). Also, even though the interviews can be considered as the interviewees' meaning-making processes, I, as researcher and interviewer, was the one who worked with the material, selected from it, interpreted, described and analyzed it (cf. Seidman 1998, 16). As a researcher I could approach and come close, but not entirely share the experiences of the other people involved. I could however attempt to understand their behaviours. The perceptions I could make were not born in an empty space, but emerged in the interplay with the people I came in contact with (cf. Vikström 2005, 22).

The limits of what kind of information I was able to produce through registering people's subjective meanings and interpretations in some particular situation can be discussed (cf. Repstad 1999, 20). However, as Seidman notes, in in-depth interviewing as a method 'considerations of representativeness and generalizability are replaced by a compelling evocation of an individual's experience' (Seidman 1998, 44).

This provides opportunities to create connections in alternative ways that replace the generalizability. I applied this in my study through seeing the connections and links between the experiences and narratives of the interviewed persons. (Cf. Seidman 1998, 44–45) In this process of interpreting and presenting the data I aimed at providing a large number of direct quotes in order to make the analyses more connected to the women's own narratives. Hence, they also became accessible to the reader. (Cf. Seidman 1998, 16)

The knowledge formed in the interaction between the researcher and the material can be considered as created in an *intersubjective* and therefore *reflexive* way, that is contextually situated in time, place and environment (Illman 2004, 39-40; cf. Davies 2008, 9–11; Spickard and Landres 2002, 12–13). This characterizes hermeneutical epistemology (Illman 2004, 40). The knowledge gaining process can be seen as very closely tied to understanding and interpretation. Knowing can be considered 'as describing and explaining the meaning of experiences and events', and 'in this sense requires a certain distance, reflection and systematization' (Verkuyten 2006, 34). Distance is required to understand the experiences, sometimes even more distance than can be possessed by the persons who have actually had the experiences interpreted (Verkuyten 2006, 34). From this perspective my positioning as a researcher was well placed. In the process of distancing myself from the material in time and concrete distance from the experiences and the circumstances of the fieldwork were significant factors. All in all, what kinds of understanding and interpretations I generated depended on factors such as the chosen theoretical framework, the research question, my personal qualities as researcher as well as the time spent in the field (cf. Opas 2004, 157).

When interpreting the data, my aim was to bring together explanations and understanding in a critical process within which the role of the researcher was not concealed, but admittedly a part of the process of knowledge construction (cf. Illman 2007, 60). To interpret the material is a combination of diverse strategies; a dialectical move between understanding, explanation and renewed understanding, which includes also emotions and convictions. (Illman 2007, 63) Consciousness of this manysidedness of interpretation should not, however, lead us to passivity, but conversely to engaging in a continuous, creative process within which we can strive for change and are ready to change ourselves (Vikström 2005, 133). For me personally this research process has meant remarkable changes in my worldview and values.

In the following chapters (5–8) I examine, present and discuss the different themes that arose from the material. In this hermeneutical process, I put emphasis on the qualitative ethnographic interview material, supported by the field diary, as well as by some statistical data. In the analysis I apply a social psychological interpretative perspective from which I observe and examine the ethnographic material. As all of these are my choices and estimations concerning what I have regarded as relevant in the material, I do not expect to present something that could be understood as the conclusive truth. Instead, I introduce the research results and simultaneously respect the open and unfinished character of my interpretations and use careful arguments to underpin my statements (cf. Vikström 2005, 123–125).

## **5 Islam and a Societal Body with Fractures**

The societal level of analysis this chapter speaks of consists of political, ideological, cultural, and economic features (cf. Verkuyten 2006, 19). At this level, I examine the role that macrosocial and historical developments have played in the identity construction of the Albanian women. However, some more microsocial features also to some extent manifest themselves, due to the nature of the material. At this level are placed such aspects as the dominant discourses of the society and differences in power status between the societal groups (cf. Liebkind 2010, 19; Verkuyten 2006, 19).

Firstly, I examine briefly the different currents that have an impact on the Islamic field in the Republic of Macedonia, such as societal antagonisms, the Albanization of Islam and the effect of re-Islamization. I also discuss the relationship between Islam and Albanian nationalism and cultural tradition. Secondly, I analyze themes related to politics, society and Islam in the Republic of Macedonia, such as human rights, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, discrimination and experiences of otherness. The emphasis in these is placed on the informants' experiences and their narratives. Thereafter I examine the ways in which Islam in the lives of Albanian women becomes visible in the public sphere. The focal points are women's presence in the public Islamic spaces and the visibility of Islam in the media and scheduling of holidays. I also discuss the societal and social transition the Albanian woman has experienced as it manifested in my material and how it reflected in transformations of the public sphere. Each of these dimensions, in which Islam was significant for the women, I analyze through the meanings given to identity and Islam as an element within it.

### **Antagonisms, Albanization and Re-Islamization**

In this section I will draw a more general picture of the prevailing societal trends that are currently linked to Islam and the Islamic religious life of the Albanian Muslim women in the Republic of Macedonia. This picture is based on previous research on the topic and com-



plemented by observations I made in the field as well as by issues that the women discussed and brought up in the interviews.

In the Republic of Macedonia, as often occurs in the Balkans, religion may be less a question of personal conviction and more a sign of belonging to a certain group. This can be interpreted as somehow historically anchored to the Ottoman millet system. Lory considers that it was in the urban centres that one started slowly to cross these inter-confessional cleavages from the second half of the 20th century onwards. This was due to the differences between the rural and the urban environments that had continued to exist in the reigning mentalities and social behaviour. (Lory 1996, 121) In the period that followed the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslims found themselves in a minority position within diverse Balkan states and this meant an important change in power relations. The delicate relationship between language and religion started to have a function as a considerable watershed when the new borders were drawn to create the nation-states in the Balkans. (Cf. Lory 1996, 121) The relatively late arrival of the national romantic influences and ideals to the region of the current Republic of Macedonia also articulated the relations between different groups.

Contrary to what one might assume, the Islam of the Republic of Macedonia differs from the Islam of the other Balkan states. This is due to the fact that, for example, in the Republic of Macedonia the numbers of religious intelligentsia have been modest in recent decades. Macedonian cities with high concentrations of Albanian-speaking people, such as Skopje and Tetovo, have been in a less favourable position compared to Sarajevo. Emigration to Turkey decreased the numbers of Islamic religious intellectuals significantly. The new (Yugoslavian) Albanian elite, educated since the 1960s and 1970s, was exposed to communist influences, which had nationalist and often anti-religious tendencies. Access to religious literature was also restricted in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia until 1990. Clayer thinks that if the number of the religious publications later on increased, it is mainly due to translations. (Clayer 2001, 238)

Despite some degree of liberalization in Yugoslav politics on issues related to Islamic religious life, which started in the 1960s, the Muslims had to wait for a more substantial religious revival until 1989/1990, when religion made its comeback into the public sphere and, to some extent, the political life. Even though during socialist period there had been a certain development in religious education, the variety of

religious publications in local languages had grown and new mosques had been built, these phenomena were taking place in parallel with an accelerated modernization and secularization of the socialist society. This modernization and secularization placed religion more in the private sphere than in the public one (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 6) and led to the decline of religious practice (Bougarel 2005, 11).

Since 1991 the new leaders of the Islamic communities in states with Albanian populations have tended to aim at re-Islamizing the national identity of the Albanians and might even have had ideas of re-Islamizing Albanian society as a whole. The tendency to 'Albanianize' the religious identity of the Muslims has also not been an entirely unknown phenomenon to be executed by the political leaders either. This tendency has often been linked to other pan-Albanian ideas. (Clayer 2001, 239) Bougarel explains this phenomenon by a desire to re-Islamize Balkan Muslims, which can strengthen the link between Islam and national identity and lead to a certain kind of 'nationalization' of Islam. He also underlines the work that needs to be carried out in order to overcome the ethnic boundaries that currently divide the Balkan Muslims. (Bougarel 2005, 14) The Islamic Religious Community, the organization supervising all the Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia, has occasionally displayed tendencies to 'Albanianize' the religious life of Muslims in the country (see Clayer 2001). Questions related to the linguistic and ethnic diversity of Macedonian Muslims, as well as those linked to their doctrinal differences, may however have an important role in preventing possible antagonisms and furthering societal harmony.

In the politically, ideologically and economically critical and even chaotic situations that have characterized the post-communist societies, and to some extent still do, the chances of re-Islamization gaining ground are improved due to the establishment of numerous religious groups, organizations and movements. This re-Islamization can be perceived as an apparition and diversification of new forms of Islam, and not necessarily as the return, or reinforcement, of pre-existing Islam. (Clayer 2001, 239) Re-Islamization has touched all parts of the Macedonian Muslim community, but it has produced a range of reactions. It seems to have been received most positively by the old urban families of Turkish or Turkish-Albanian background. According to Clayer, this is due to their wish to reaffirm their prominence in society against the Albanian group of Muslims, who are often recently urbanized and have a rural background. Clayer thinks that in the villages traditional Islam can still be met and this tendency is in general

stronger in the Republic of Macedonia than in the Republic of Kosovo. She sees religion in both of these territories as being closely linked to Albanian customary law, *Kanun*.<sup>89</sup> (Clayer 2001, 240)

The Albanian women that I interviewed for the study acknowledged the regional differences in mentality and cultural features. Thirty-one-year-old Wafa, who had lived in another Balkan country and was a follower of the Bektashi path, was not very satisfied with the situation in the Republic of Macedonia, when she compared it with the circumstances that she had left behind. She considered that there was too much divergence of opinion within the Albanian community and that the knowledge of and respect for religion was poor. She was also sad about the accentuated division between men and women. (Wafa) Fifty-nine-year-old Zahra, who had a mixed religious background had, like Wafa, also lived elsewhere and stated that she could perceive a difference in the attitudes between the countries, both Balkan and Western, and expressed dissatisfaction with this. (Zahra). Wafa and Zahra, who both lived in Macedonian villages, did not seem to have an experience of really belonging to the Macedonian society. The time they had spent elsewhere, or their religious backgrounds, which differentiated them from the majority of people around them could make them feel 'different' in a more accentuated manner when they encountered the challenges of identity negotiation in Macedonian society, as the validation of their identities was not what they had expected it to be. This could modify the perception the women had of themselves and challenge even their self-understandings, as their societal contacts were not directly validating the way they felt they were in their person and therefore also their identity. They also brought up the experience that as women they did not appreciate certain local features such as the too strict division between the genders and how they could be treated as women.

The impressions of these two women produced an image of a socially more coercive, communitarian and traditional way of living that would pertain within the borders of the Republic of Macedonia. This indication could be related to the minority position of the Albanians in Macedonian society, as this position often tends to strengthen the internal cohesion and the identity of a particular group and might

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<sup>89</sup> The most famous Albanian customary law, *Kanun*, is the Code of Law of Lekë Dukagjini, in Albanian *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*, which dates from the 14th century. In practice it was applied by the board of elders within the unity of an Albanian *fis*, that is a tribe or a clan. (Castellan 2002, 34)

facilitate the appreciation given to old cultural features. As Hall argues, the preservation of tradition and memories of the past can be used in the aim of holding together the national group (Hall 1999, 52–53). Also, in the Balkans regionality has been a significant identity marker. This could be one of the reasons for the experiences of Wafa and Zahra; that things elsewhere had been different (cf. Clayer 2007). Furthermore, the often more emphatically rural lifestyle of the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia might explain at least to some extent their attachment to more traditional ways of living.

However, contrary to Wafa, from Habiba's point of view religion had a high status within Macedonian society and she thought that interest in religion was increasing in all societal groups. Sixty-year-old Habiba was born and lived in the city; and she had seen the role of religion increasing over the years and considered that religion had a higher status now than during those days when she was young (Habiba). From Habiba's perspective the status Islam had in society had transformed during her lifetime. Habiba distinguished between the past and the present religion, which could be motivated by the historical and political developments in the Republic of Macedonia from a socialist to a democratic state with more clearly guaranteed freedom of religion. Habiba's age placed her in those generations which would have internalized Islam as an inherent part of their cultural heritage even though it was often less practised, as Clayer suggests (2001). What Habiba said about her way of being a Muslim and her Muslim identity seemed to correspond well with Clayer's thoughts. The change in the status of religion that Habiba described could be interpreted as a currently increasing degree of space and value being accorded to the Muslim identities within Macedonian society. Thus, they likely had already existed during the socialist period.

Twenty-two-year-old Farah explained that people in the Republic of Macedonia nowadays were more curious about religious issues, posing more questions regarding religion and life and also challenging prevailing understandings of the religion and presenting their own thoughts about these issues. This increase was, according to Farah, also related to the religious and public space: 'I see that at mosques when they do the prayer, there are no empty places sometimes and they pray outside' (Farah). Sabah and Nuriya shared Farah's opinion and said that this increased interest in Islam manifested itself in different ways, such as more frequent mosque visits (Sabah; Nuriya), in various religious and spiritual activities and in the way people were getting closer to each other and helping each other regardless of their

religion or nationality (Nuriya). Aisha mentioned furthermore various religious gatherings which had become more popular, but there was also an increased interest in reading (Aisha). Hawwa and Qadr stated that access to information concerning religion had become easier through Internet, books, libraries, workshops and NGOs (Hawwa; Qadr). Hawwa thought that nowadays nobody could say that they did not know of some aspect related to Islam, as there were plenty of chances to learn. Within society this increase meant that Islam was practised more, the Qur'an was read and there was more interest in participating in dars. (Hawwa)

Amina stated furthermore that people, particularly youth, had nowadays the skills, abilities and self-consciousness to read the Qur'an: the true meaning of Islam. This could help them to come to the conclusions that Islam offers a strong basis in life and that this life functions, as Amina explained, 'like a path to the other life Hereafter' (Amina). Mahabba said that in the village community where she lived interest in religion was not growing, but in the society that she frequented, outside her home neighbourhood, it was increasing. This was visible in the people's ways of searching for knowledge, reading and asking questions. (Mahabba) Zainab thought that particularly in Skopje, but also in the village where she originally came from, the interest towards Islam was growing among the young and people were practicing the prayer more (Zainab). What the women brought up regarding the Islamic religiosity and interest shown towards it could be signs of a strengthening of Islamic and Muslim identities which had different intensities depending on the local context, a village or a city, as well as on the generations the Muslims belonged to.

Some of the Albanian women, however, were of the opposite opinion, and stated that the level of religiosity, knowledge regarding religion and the status of religion within society was low or decreasing (Wafa; Qadr). Qadr lived in a village and contrary to the women quoted above she said that the young were not interested in performing Islamic religious rituals, reading the Qur'an or other works related to religion or praying. The young merely stated that they believed in Allah, but this according to Qadr did not make them Muslims, because they did not fulfill any criteria of being a Muslim. Qadr thought that this was due to limits religion sets on going out and doing other more interesting things. Qadr itemized these: 'The younger genera-

tion wants to be in fashion [...] in tops, so this is the manifest[ation] [smiles] [...] you see all the girls now [smiles]' (Qadr). Qadr's answer implicitly revealed the knowledge and understanding she had regarding what it meant to be a Muslim. She had an opinion or idea about this and argued that the young people did not live up to it, for example at the level of clothing. With this comment Qadr also defended her perception of a Muslim identity and the value she was giving to it. According to her the younger generations were rather not respecting what she would understand as a Muslim identity. This differed greatly from the views that the other women presented above and spoke for more secularized positioning of young people towards Islam.

Fatima for her part considered that the status of religion at the societal level was poor due to lack of knowledge about Islam. People did not really know what Islam was and that was why they were not practising it. (Fatima) Mahabba was not happy regarding the status of religion within society either and wished that it would improve (Mahabba). Aisha and Amala considered that the societal status of religion was on a satisfying (Aisha) or a general level (Amala). According to Amala within the Albanian community the status of religion was not changing or transforming so much (Amala). Despite this diversity of opinions, the Albanian women predominantly considered that the interest towards Islam was increasing in the Republic of Macedonia and that this manifested itself in various ways. However, there were, according to the women, also signs of people putting distance between themselves and the Islamic religious tradition and Muslim identity. This was motivated, for example, by aspirations to behave in a less traditional manner, or due to lack of knowledge regarding Islamic religious tradition.

A manifestation of the Albanization of Islam in the Republic of Macedonia could be perceived in what Farah said about the teaching of Islamic topics at medrese. Farah was not so well informed about the contents of this Islamic education and she assumed that there was a test or exam required in order to enter the medrese. She explained that the same education was given to everyone, but that occasionally it could be hard to understand for non-Albanian-speakers, as the majority of Islamic education was organized in Albanian. She mentioned some examples concerning the education that took place in Bosnian and Turkish, but the availability of education in these languages was modest. (Farah) Thus, the field of Islamic education would be dominated by the education that was given in Albanian. The Albanization of the Islamic religious education and religious identity could be

explained as a counterbalance to the historically dominant position the Slavic Muslims have had in the Islamic administrative structures (cf. Krasniqi 2010, 25–26), as well as by the antagonisms between the Albanians and the Macedonians in the Republic of Macedonia, as religious identity between these groups, in addition to the ethnic one, often embodied the difference. However, the fact that the Albanian language was dominant in the field of Islamic education was also a quite logic development, as majority of Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia were Albanians.

After the dissolution of the Yugoslavian state, Islamic religious practice gained more freedom in the Republic of Macedonia and Islamic influences from the outside also reached the country. The increase in the amount of Islamic literature and knowledge has also facilitated an Islamic revival and re-Islamization of the Macedonian population. Muslims have also become political actors. The numerically dominant position of the Albanians among the Macedonian Muslim communities has most likely also supported the Albanization of the Islamic identity in the Republic of Macedonia. In the Macedonian societal circumstances in which religion often takes the meaning-laden role of a divider or a unifier, one seems to be slightly pushed to take a position in relation to Islam. One often either engages with it, or distances oneself from it.

One reference person stated that there had been strivings within the Macedonian society 'to create arguments and misunderstandings between the biggest religious groups, Muslim and Orthodox, but it has not been successful' (Interview 10). This kind of deliberate harm had a significant meaning as '98 percent of the believers belong to these groups' (Interview 10). During my fieldwork the concern of the informants and other people I met as for the alterably tense relationships between different societal groups surfaced several times. The possibility that conflicts and tensions could, and to some extent even did, emerge during my stays in the region, was acknowledged and an improvement was wished for. It was even claimed that the political actors intentionally masterminded the chaos that mainly had an ethnic basis, as this kind of instability made people easier to govern. Furthermore, it was suggested that, when the political discussion was dominated by something like this, the other important challenges such as social and economic issues and questions related to privatization gained less attention. (Cf. Dérens 2012, 23; Ragaru 2008)

By some women Islam could be seen as a potential help in healing the infected and difficult relations between the groups and make society more healthy (e.g. Amina). There were also hopes for greater acceptance of Islam and Islamic ways of living, so that Muslims would not be perceived as persons with potentially negative characteristics. For example Fatima hoped for an improvement so that the attitudes and ways of thinking directed to the Muslims by other (often non-Muslim) groups would change. At the time of the interview Fatima felt that at the university where she came into contact with other groups than her own, the image the others had of her, her religion and religious practice did not correspond to her own perception. (Fatima) These perceptions of other people, which Fatima did not find accurate, seemed to play a part in the way she experienced her identity as a Muslim validated by the social environment. In the current circumstances she found it challenging to transmit an image of a Muslim that she herself could recognize to the others due to the prevailing attitudes. The social construction of a Muslim identity was therefore according to her experiences difficult in the present societal context.

### **Albanian Nationalism and Cultural Traditions**

As has been established previously, the Muslim community in the Republic of Macedonia is not ethnically homogeneous even though Albanians represent a strong majority within it. Clayer thinks that for the Muslim communities in the Balkans Islam is not the principal marker of the identity,<sup>90</sup> as for example the predominantly Muslim Albanians and the Turks despite the common religion, have different languages, cultures, customs, social statuses and are exposed to different politics in different Balkan societies. For this reason the relationship between religious and national identity becomes a more complex one. In the Republic of Macedonia there have been some political or religious movements trying to bring together both the national and the religious elements. (Clayer 2001, 239; cf. Poulton 1991, 82–83)

However, Xavier Bougarel and Bashkimi Iseni state that Islam is not in general 'used' in an accentuated manner in Albanian nationalist discourse, which more often tends to be rather atheistic, and the role of Islam in the Albanian political, national or nationalist, discourse has remained modest (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 7; Iseni 2007a, 32; Clayer

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<sup>90</sup> Except the Muslims who are speakers of Slavic languages as for them it is precisely Islam that makes the difference (Clayer 2001, 239).



2007, 721). One reason for this may be the multiconfessionality that predominates within the Albanian community, even though in the Republic of Macedonia they are mainly Muslims. However, there have been claims of a link between some particular Albanian political party and the Islamic Religious Community (cf. Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 7). Of the Albanian women that I spoke to, Aida remembered a fuss in the media concerning an important post within the Islamic Religious Community, when the person in the post had been replaced after the political party in power had changed. The Islamic Religious Community was not officially connected to any political party and there had been a discussion as to why the post had been given to another person and no grounds for this had been given. According to Aida this did not have an influence on the people, because it was more a question about who would have this particular post. (Aida) Krasniqi considers that none of the Albanian political parties in the Republic of Macedonia are religiously affiliated, but 'they have constantly attempted to control the institution of the Islamic Religious Community' (Krasniqi 2010, 28). The aims and strivings that are often national in essence can assume religious connotations, possibly due to the prevailing ethnic antagonisms. Because the ethnic and religious divisions correspond largely with one another, politics and religion can be more easily confounded. (Krasniqi 2010, 28; cf. Clayer 2007, 721)

The interviewees and the people I met in my fieldwork were aware of nationalist tendencies within the society (e.g. Hawwa; Zainab) and some of the women (e.g. Amina; Mahabba) thought that if people in the Republic of Macedonia were more inclined towards religion then societal conditions could be improved, as it could have the effect of introducing the moral impact of Islamic thought into the society. When asked about the relationship between the Albanian cultural background and Islam, Zainab stated that 'somehow they are connected [...] but in some [...] things they are mm [...] apart [...] different a lot' (Zainab). Zainab said also that Islam had eased her nationalist thoughts and that she had become less nationalist by practising religion. Nowadays she put less emphasis on Albanian cultural features, such as the historical personage of Skënderbeu (Skanderbeg), but that for other Albanians these things were still important. Zainab also found that she had difficulties to understand her friends, who manifested strong nationalist tendencies. (Zainab) That is, religious belonging and identity might in some cases, as Zainab here stated, tone down the nationalist tendencies. This could be due to the experienced image of a wider frame of reference and unifying nature of the Islamic religious identity, or more related to moral choices and social responsi-

bility of the believer. In Zainab's case her religious identity as a Muslim might cause her distancing from her national/ethnic identity, as she found it difficult to experience her religious identity as sufficiently coherent with the Albanian one. Clayer (2001) thinks that the younger Albanian generations, which are more inclined towards nationalist ideology, are often atheists. There could nonetheless also be attempts to gather together Islamic and nationalist ideas, which Clayer sees as Islamo-nationalist orientation. Zainab's positioning towards Islam and nationalist thinking however differed from these views.

Marko Lehti notes that nationalism has for a long time played a part in the conflicts in the Balkan area, but observes also that the nature of these nationalist issues is not uniform. Nationality and nationalism have not necessarily been the main reason for violence, but different political powers and careerists have abused the national ideologies for obtaining their own goals and in this way nationalist rhetoric has justified the objectives of attaining power. (Lehti 1999b, 19) Iseni estimates that even though the political and religious actors in the Republic of Macedonia might share common interests, they are ideologically separated. All the political formations established by Albanians tend to orient themselves towards the secular and nationalist direction. It can however occur that the symbolic support given by the religious circles might facilitate the path to power for the politicians. (Iseni 2007a, 32; cf. Duijzings 2002, 60)

The Albanian women interviewed seemed at the individual level mostly to consider that belonging to the Albanian community was less central in their lives than their religious conviction. Also, religious identity seemed to be more emphasized than, for instance, being a woman. Even though the societal context tended to underline ethnic identity, in the women's answers religious identity was individually often expressed as more significant. Qadr for instance said that she was proud of both: of being a Muslim and a woman. In addition she was proud of her career, and she mentioned also that she was politically active. For Qadr the community she felt like belonging to was mainly Muslim and connected to the area she lived in, but she thought that due to her job she was also a part of a completely another kind of community. (Qadr) Thus, Qadr was very aware of different communities and identities around her and negotiated her identity in relation to them. Her religious belonging seemed to be more emphasized in the circle of her household, but in the other contexts her career and political activities might be more important identity markers. However, she did not discuss at all her belonging to the Albanian community.

Hence, it might be less meaningful to her identity construction. Zainab valued her Muslimness more than her womanhood, and she stated that she never thought about her womanhood even though it was important to her too. When she defined her community, she considered that she belonged to both: the Muslim and the Albanian one. Zainab said that Albanians had other religions too, but that she belonged to this particular group, which was defined by this religious and ethnic belonging. (Zainab) Zainab thus defined and perceived her identity in relation to different religious groups, but also in relation to the wider Albanian community, in which one could find a diversity of religious communities. At a more individual level, Islam was more meaningful for her than her gender. In a social sense, Albanian identity seemed to become more significant and was brought on the side of the Muslim identity.

Khadija, who was a follower of the Bektashi path, stated in a similar manner to Sunnite Qadr that she was happy with both – being a lady and a Muslim (Khadija). For Zahra, who had a mixed religious background, being a woman was the feature that she valued most in her life (Zahra). Sunnite Fatima considered that the Albanian tradition in the Republic of Macedonia did not give the women rights and opportunities that the women had according to Islam. That was why she did not respect the tradition and did not like it. Fatima stated: ‘Being a female and also being a Muslim, it gives [me] those rights, it doesn’t take[...] them away, and the tradition and mentality of Albanians is different’ (Fatima). Fatima’s opinion distanced her from the Albanian cultural tradition, while promoting her Muslim identity and womanhood, which she considered to deserve a higher status than what they currently enjoyed. In Fatima’s argument Muslim identity in a certain sense supported womanhood and guaranteed more rights, opportunities and chances for women. That is, Fatima was actually experiencing difficulties as a Muslim in two contexts: in the larger societal one (university) and in her own local Albanian community. However these challenges were different in nature. In the larger societal context she was exposed to the negative stereotypes and prejudices as a Muslim, whereas in the local Albanian tradition she could experience being limited as a Muslim woman. Zahra for her part mentioned earlier the negative experiences that she had as a woman, not as a Muslim in the Republic of Macedonia. This was significant for her as her gender identity was the one that she valued the most. Zahra was a housewife and lived in a village, which could indicate that she mainly frequented the Albanian circles that provided her with the experiences she had had.

Despite the fact that the opposite opinion is common in the Republic of Macedonia, Natacha Andonovski notes that the national feeling among the Albanians is far from unambiguous (Andonovski 1998, 69; cf. e.g. Thiessen 2007, 27). However, in the geopolitical circumstances of the Balkans, which unfortunately have often favoured war-like, restless conditions, ethnicity seems frequently to have been the only element creating cohesion and helping the identification processes of the groups (Andonovski 1998, 69). The problematic issues in the Republic of Macedonia that are related to the terms of Albanian national identity and belonging are crucial as these determine their relation also to the other Albanian populations. The affective dimensions of the Albanian national assertion become more visible in the differentiation process, which is marked by confessional, linguistic or economic factors. Andonovski considers that if these three components confront the Albanians of the Republic of Macedonia and the Macedonians, they also confront the Albanians of Albania and the Albanians living elsewhere (Andonovski 1998, 71–72), as Albanians live in varying conditions in different states and form in them different confessional and dialectal compositions. These Albanian antagonisms take similar forms as the Macedonian question, because like it, they are simultaneously internal and external. (Cf. Andonovski 1998, 72; Blumi 2002, 55 and 57–58) The Albanian population in the Republic of Macedonia is somewhat heterogeneous due to diverse migratory movements, differences in the urban and rural life styles of the population and Albanians' status as a minority within the state (cf. Poulton 1991; Brunnbauer 2002). Even though one tends to assume that the representatives of one nation share a common religiosity, in the Balkan context one should be aware of the impact of historical and political backgrounds, which differ between different states. Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia are often described as more closely connected to their traditions and it is said that they have stronger links to religion, something that has become more observable particularly in recent years (cf. Iseni 2007a, 26 and 33).

The importance of Albanian cultural tradition also gained momentum in the interviews. Hawwa for instance mentioned that:

*Hawwa [through an interpreter]: [...] It's a characteristic for the Albanians in Macedonia[...].*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Hawwa: That they do keep towards the traditional things [...] the Albanian population is aa people that are [...] mostly towards traditional ways [...] and aa they are so strongly keep[ing] for that tradition [...] usually there are Albanians that go towards tradition being an Albanian mostly than a Muslim [...] so it's not a society, or a community, where should be like a Muslim and then Albanian, I would like [it] to be like that, but for now it's not like that, it's more Albanian than Muslim. (Hawwa, 22 years old, city dweller)*

What Hawwa said could be interpreted as a wish to promote her Muslim identity over the Albanian one, even though currently Albanian identity was in general more important to the Albanian population. Thus, when combining the two, the people clearly emphasized religious identity less. For thirty-five-year-old Amala, by contrast to Hawwa, the fact that she was an Albanian was the most valuable identity aspect. However, she mentioned that divisions and differences in the Islamic religious life were based on incorrect interpretations and incomplete information concerning that what exactly was taught in the Qur'an. Amala was also of opinion that: 'In Qur'an there is more rights for ladies than for a man' (Amala). Amala, who had a mixed religious background, described herself as a believer and a religiously liberal person. These thoughts could indicate that Islam was of a lesser significance for her identity than ethnic and national belonging. Possibly also the social context in the village environment where she lived, contrary to Hawwa, could reinforce the emphasis placed on the Albanian identity. However, Clayer (2001) suggests that religious identity could be of great importance to the Albanians in the Macedonian villages. Amala was furthermore highly educated and active in a working life in the city, that is, in continuous contact with wider society. In Amala's case it was possible that both the larger societal and the village contexts further emphasized the importance of the ethnic and national identities. This could also be explained in terms of her age, as Amala had grown up in the socialist Yugoslavia in which religious identity was, at least officially, less significant and national and ethnic belonging played a more central role. Amala had also a mixed religious background, which could indicate that the pluri-confessional, religiously tolerant orientation that Clayer (2001) speaks about played a part of some kind in how she positioned herself in relation to religious issues.

For Sabah, who lived in a village and was a housewife, being a Muslim was the most important identity element, but she considered the Albanian community as the one she primarily belonged to (Sabah). Sabah, alike Zainab, mentioned Albanian ethnicity or nationality in the context of group belonging, while on the individual level for both of the women their Muslim identity was of primary importance. Contrary to other women, Zahra did not feel comfortable about belonging to any community in the Republic of Macedonia. She expressed however the desire to be surrounded by educated, good and open-minded people. She had the experience of living in a sense in her own world and was not well-informed about wider societal issues. (Zahra) These details reinforced what Zahra already mentioned regarding her experiences of not belonging in Macedonian society, aspects, which would have meant that she consciously or unconsciously withdrew from the social environment. Her experiences illustrated her feelings of otherness *vis-à-vis* the Macedonian Albanian community.

The way of living more imbued with traditions of the Albanians might at least partly be explained by the historical importance of regionality. In the Ottoman period other kinds of expressions of belonging than ethnic identity, traditionally imagined as particularly accentuated, seemed more significant. (Clayer 2007, 23–25, 29, 31) For the Albanians, who were members of different confessional groups and whose language did not yet have a strong literary heritage, belonging to one family and lineage was of importance. Clayer describes this system as patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. (Clayer 2007, 23, 25) This way of living was reinforced by geographical conditions characterized by difficult communications which were more favourable to the birth of compartmentalized than unified communities (Poulton 2000, 8–9). Later on, the raising of national awareness and Titoist Yugoslavian politics that created a three-tier system of national rights divided people into three groups and introduced a new system that defined the relations and borders between groups and communities (cf. Poulton 1991, 5).

On the side of dogmatic and experience-impregnated factors Islam also has a regional dimension. Religion certainly is not the only factor that may have an impact on the individual behaviour, but it can be an inherent part of culture one lives in. In the behaviour and habits of an individual the place accorded to religion is limited, as a result of the other cultural ways of functioning and due to the role the local, surrounding culture plays (cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 179, 185 and

187)<sup>91</sup>. From this perspective the unifying nature of the Umma can be understood as a secondary group of identification for the Muslims, when Muslims who share the same nationality often form the primary group. However, the connection between all Muslims is strengthened by common, shared religious responsibilities. (Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 188) Of the women interviewed Farah had an all-embracing view on what could be considered as Umma:

*Farah: Umma aa it's aa, it came from Prophet Muhammed sallallahu alayhi wa sallam [may Allah pray on him and grant him peace], all the nations, all the people after and while he was here [...] are called Umma [...] even you are part of it [...] being a Christian [...] the Umma it's, it's divided in believers and unbelievers.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Farah: And not nationalities or something like that.*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Farah: That is Umma.*

*(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

Farah's view was exceptional, as the women more often tended to see Umma, or *ummet* as it is known in Albanian, as the followers of the Prophet (e.g. Nuriya) or the community of Muslims. Hawwa and Zainab thought that Umma gathered all Muslims all over the world, regardless of their nationality or country of origin (Hawwa; Zainab). Amina saw in Umma the Islamic population that believed in God, in the prophets and in the Prophet Muhammad (Amina). For Aida, Umma did not have significance (Aida).

The way that Islamic concepts, which often are viewed as unambiguous, were described and understood differently by the women, could demonstrate diversity of interpretations. The most comprehensive view regarding Umma was that of Farah, while for the others the notion could refer to an identification with and in relation to the global Muslim community. In a kind of contrast with Farah was Aida's opinion according to which Umma did not have significance at all in her life, and so her possible group identification as a Muslim could be found elsewhere, or was not something very strongly emphasized in her religiosity. Women's views could also be examined in the light of how Nilüfer Göle sees Islam as a previous binding force among people who belonged to a locality, to a particular confession, and to

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<sup>91</sup> As examples one can observe Islamic communities in the 'Western' Europe that are often established on national, linguistic or ethnic grounds (cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 187).

a nation-state, but which in contemporary times has become a reference that goes beyond the local frontiers, provides an imaginary bond between Muslims and also enables Muslim self-fashioning. (Göle 2010, 260) In the women's answers Umma was sketched as a border-transcending community that did not recognize state lines or necessarily even inter-religious borders. This kind of community could function, as Göle suggests, an imaginary bond and enable a more individual attachment and link to the Muslim community. The unity and social points of connection Islam offered could promote more individual identities and create border-transcending global identities. The Muslim identities in the Republic of Macedonia could, thus, be moving and transforming from the more regional ones towards the more global.

### **'We are just used for the votes'**

(Interpreter in Zainab's interview)

Brunnbauer states that privatization in the Republic of Macedonia 'was fraught with corruption, and even the highest levels of power were involved in fraudulent schemes' (Brunnbauer 2002, 19). The corruption scandals and widespread poverty have had a more widely disturbing effect on political life and therefore 'there is hardly anyone who enjoys enough popularity and trust to be able to provide much needed leadership' (Brunnbauer 2002, 19). This has implied that the political class is widely held in disdain and the people have lost the modest trust they had in the political elite. Brunnbauer estimates that the situation could provide fertile ground for the radical politicians with a 'clean' image and a coherent programme. (Brunnbauer 2002, 19) The impressions that I gathered and was exposed to in my fieldwork during the years 2008–2009 were largely in line with Brunnbauer's views. This does not mean however that the situation would have remained entirely fixed in the Republic of Macedonia (cf. Report by the Commissioner for Human Rights 2008).

According to the Albanian women, and other people I met in the fieldwork, many of their problems were seen as being linked to these prevailing societal and political circumstances, which were sources of dissatisfaction for them. Amina considered that the politics practised in the country were disrespectful of human rights and were the cause of many difficulties such as rising prices, which rendered everyday life difficult, as people could not acquire the necessities on a daily basis. (Amina) Amina itemized the problems:



*Amina [through an interpreter]: [There is] a big per cent[age] of unemployment in a state and those that we have voted, like the political participant, for us, for the people they...*

*NR: Deputies?*

*Amina: They have made that inflation that is going [on] in Macedonia, rising up all the prices of the products and all these, those employed have small wage, monthly payment[s], so as it [wage] cannot cover all the costs, as here [at this point] is stepped those rights, of human rights you know, you cannot buy everything, while they [politicians] keep raising up the standard and with low price of wage monthly payment[s] and also the tuition fees [...] and taxes [...] they have raised up, also them, and those money going in institutions like health, education, they [politicians] keep them and take them for the marketing and promotion during the election.*

*(Amina, 23 years old, village dweller)*

The issues of prices level and purchasing power of the population raised by Amina were everyday reality in the Republic of Macedonia where the living expenses are very high compared to incomes. Amina also stated in this excerpt that in addition to the rising levels of prices, the challenges in Macedonian society included important unemployment, low salaries, inflation and the various fees collected by the state, which had become higher. Furthermore, according to Amina, the politicians were responsible for using the state's and the taxpayers' money for their own personal election campaigns instead of improving the conditions in the country – an aspect that might in general discourage the taxpayers. While describing these challenges Amina did not make distinctions between societal groups. Thus, these seemingly affected all the citizens. One person I met in my fieldwork also said that despite low salaries, fines could be very high. S/he concluded: 'The fines are from Europe and the salary from Africa' (Field diary). This kind of an argument would speak of a transitional society where some relatively integral aspects still searched for their final places. In context such as this the identities, precisely at the point when their limits were blurred and subject to change, could also be delineated very clearly in response to these kinds of local, particularly political and economic, circumstances, which did not promote stable and secured identities.

Questions concerning the rights the various societal groups had, or the rights the groups experienced as being limited concerned, according to thirty-five-year-old city dweller Nawal, everyone: 'It's something familiar for you here [...] during your stay in Macedonia these three months you can, you can see that' (Nawal). With this remark Nawal most likely referred to the questions related to the rights of each soci-

etal group, as they were societally a topic that was often discussed in different contexts and often invoked emotions. As an example Nawal mentioned efforts to get more work places for the Albanians within the state (Nawal). It was occasionally experienced, as I will discuss later on more extensively, that the Macedonian state mainly supported Slavic Macedonians and did not pay enough attention to the rights and opportunities of minorities. The situation was strongly linked to the internal and external political situations of the country, as both of these were linked to many-layered tensions. By contrast to Nawal, Zainab said that she did not know of issues that would override the rights of any particular group in society (Zainab). As a member of Macedonian society, she personally could not perceive any insufficiency when it came to her own or others' chances to be who they wanted to be.

The issue was raised that human rights were not respected in the political field of the Republic of Macedonia. Of the women Hanifa, for example, was concerned about the implementation of human rights in the country (Hanifa). Fatima for her part said that there might be a pressure on some groups of people during elections, which actually meant that on some occasions the voter's free choice and will did not materialize. Politicians were often thought of as mainly looking after their own private interests or rights instead of those of the state or a particular group within the society. (E.g. Fatima; Amala; cf. Farkas 2007, 65–68) As a concrete example Fatima told what could occur during the elections:

*Fatima [through an interpreter]: That is not respected that everyone has a right to vote [...] I have the right to vote only for one party or don't vote at all, it's like a pressure [...] there is no way that your vote will be to no one, 'cause if you don't vote [for] the the party, this one or... that [other one] will take your vote [...] no matter if you vote or not.  
(Fatima, 24 years old, village dweller)*

By this Fatima meant that due to the misuse of political power, every citizen's vote was used and given in the elections even though the voter might not have voted at all. According to her it was impossible to remain uninvolved. Amala stated that if human rights were not respected within Macedonian society, it was more because of political than religious factors:

*Amala [through an interpreter]: They [politicians] are just passing by human rights.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Amala: Because people, politicians, here are more for private things [...] it's more business than politics.*

*(Amala, 35 years old, village dweller)*

Here Amala refers to the same issue raised in the previous interview excerpts namely the irresponsible governance of the country, and the corruption; phenomena that rendered the people frustrated and could make them feel powerless. Even while being politically active and voting, one could seldom see an improvement in the societal circumstances. Instead it became obvious that some people enjoyed benefits at the expense of others, purely because of their positions of power. A person I met in the field expressed his/her frustration during one period of elections: 'Now they [the politicians] are giving us some fifteen minutes of their time in the streets, only to go and ignore us during the following four years, when the elections are over' (Field diary).

Amina thought that human rights could actually only be respected within Islam or an Islamic way of living. They might be written into the constitutions of the countries, but not implemented in practice. (Amina) Aisha said that Islam had an evening affect as it aimed at treating everyone equally, 'no matter what they are, female or male, Albanian or non-Albanian or something else, aaa Islam[ic] or Christian' (Aisha). Fatima thought that a true believer was not capable of impeding another person's human rights or trying to abuse them. She felt that this was due to the expectations placed on true believers, which involved that they could not violate other people's human rights or try to exploit them. (Fatima) When I posed a question concerning human rights and how they were respected in the political and religious fields in the Republic of Macedonia, Khadija was of the opinion that 'they [people in the positions of power] are doing aa aa brainwash [...] to the people and they are just getting what they need [for themselves]' (Khadija). That is, the level of general dissatisfaction among people I spoke with as Macedonian citizens was remarkable. The women, and others, seemed to distance themselves from the way political power was used and probably did not feel so very concerned about it, as their will as citizens rarely materialized. These experiences did not seem to support the development of a common civil identity.

Regarding the rights of women, Amina considered that contrary to non-Muslims, Muslim women have been accorded their rights ever since Islam was revealed. She concluded: 'Islam truly provides all the

rights for all the human beings equally' (Amina). Aida thought that there needed to be a change of attitude among the Muslims concerning education, as now they were thinking that it was not needed. She emphasized that education was everyone's right. Aida also mentioned that within some Muslim groups women were not given their own rights, 'they don't have the right to speak, they don't have the right to act' (Aida). This applied also to the men within these groups, as they could be functional only within their own group, not in or with the others. (Aida) In the first one of these two excerpts Islam is seen as the ideal, one which materializes women's rights, and because of this Muslim women in general had a better position than others. According to Amina Islam also guaranteed human rights for all and therefore most likely offered a safe framework for each person's identity construction. Aida's view offered a different perspective. She saw differences between the Muslim groups and thought that people's chances to act and speak were in some ways restricted in some of them. From Aida's perspective this was more directed towards women, but men in these groups suffered also. Aida pointed out that Muslims still had negative opinions about education and she considered changes in these opinions to be necessary. Her criticism was more directed at the way of functioning of the Muslims than to Islam, and Aida clearly wished to question many aspects of what it meant to be a Muslim in the Republic of Macedonia.

Hawwa reflected on the level of respect for human rights in the political and religious spheres and thought that human rights were usually guaranteed by religion, but that in political issues they were sometimes trampled over (Hawwa). Farah was of the opinion that religious persons, or religious leaders in general, were not very active in the societal life and were unwilling to receive criticism in the Republic of Macedonia. Farah said with slight irony that 'they are perfect, they don't do mistakes [smiling]' (Farah). Nuriya was also sceptic about this and argued that religious persons or leaders in the country 'usually think that they are the best one[s]' (Nuriya). Aisha suspected that the leaders did not keep their promises at all times (Aisha). However, for instance Zainab, Fatima, Mahabba and Qadr said that the religious leaders and people in the Republic of Macedonia did tolerate criticism. Qadr added that criticism was actually tolerated all the time, especially by the women (Qadr). Nuriya saw being religious and a politician as categories excluding each other (Nuriya). Hawwa would have appreciated more and stronger dialogue between Islamic and Christian religious leaders (Hawwa).

Khadija stated that when one was speaking the truth, criticism was badly received by religious leaders and people in the country. According to Khadija, societal debates in which religious leaders participated took place in Albania, but not in the Republic of Macedonia. (Khadija) Nawal, on the contrary, said that religious leaders participated in societal debates, but like Farah and Nuriya she thought that they tolerated criticism poorly (Nawal). Aida could not answer this question, as she did not know. However she stated that Islamic religious leaders were visible in the media only when Islamic celebrations were topical 'from Bajram to Bajram' as Aida put it, but they were not involved in politics. (Aida) As a religiously topical societal issue Sabah remembered a conflict that had taken place between imams (Sabah). Mahabba thought that religious persons not only listened to the criticism directed at them, but also accepted it. She considered that religious leaders were active, at least to some extent, in the societal debates. (Mahabba) Zainab elaborated that it was not somehow obligatory to ask the opinion of the religious leaders on societal issues, but it might sometimes happen (Zainab). Thus, the women held a range of views concerning the characteristics of religious leaders, the group of Muslims and the politicians in the country. There was a tendency to direct criticism towards local administrative structures and their functioning, more towards the political than the religious ones. The Islamic way of life could be perceived as supporting the human rights. However, there were also opinions that criticized the attitudes the Muslims might have towards education and Muslim women's, and to some extent men's, opportunities to act and to express themselves. Islamic religious leaders were societally active at least to some extent, but this, or the way it was done, was not appreciated by all of the women.

### **Islam, Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Religion**

As for the opinions concerning freedom of speech, the Albanian women predominantly positioned themselves positively towards it, but often wished for some limits to be drawn to prevent one from purposely hurting others (e.g. Fatima; Nuriya; Sabah; Aisha; Zahra; Nawal; Qadr; Mahabba). This opinion was supported by Islamic values according to Fatima (Fatima). Amina stated that each individual could be considered as having been born with freedom of speech. She also thought that a Muslim was morally responsible and relative to his/her words (Amina). Aisha said that limits on freedom of speech would prevent abuse and trampling on other people's rights (Aisha). Farah considered that one should be adequately aware of one's speech, and

stated concerning freedom of speech that 'unlimited things always hurts the limits of somebody else' (Farah).

Habiba thought that freedom of expression reigned within Islam, but that there were also rules according to which religion is pursued and practised in one's life (Habiba). That is, freedom of speech could be applied in the framework of the Islamic worldview and Islam could be seen as guaranteeing this freedom. Zainab reckoned that people were free to talk and that they had the right to be respected by others (Zainab). Khadija, who spoke from a Bektashi (minority) point of view considered that there was no freedom of speech within Macedonian society and she wanted this to change so that the people who were right would have the chance to speak out, and those who were wrong would be restricted (Khadija). Qadr thought that particularly in political debates freedom of speech should be limited (Qadr). Aida on the other hand considered freedom of speech to be something necessary (Aida).

Like many others Nawal also supported certain restrictions within society, as she thought that 'you should know how to behave in certain situation [...] that's why I say that it shouldn't be unlimited [...] because if you are unlimited the society, the society here, will be [...] disaster' (Nawal). To the question about freedom of speech, Hawwa answered: 'The freedom of my speech ends where your freedom of speech starts [...] if you cross that limit you [...] start with [...] of-fending' (Hawwa). When Wafa experienced freedom of speech in the Republic of Macedonia as lacking or incomplete in quality, even though there was a need for it (Wafa), Fatima on contrary thought that freedom of speech did exist (Fatima). The women predominantly saw freedom of speech as something positive and necessary, however it should not be used in a harmful way. The opinions regarding how freedom of speech was implemented were particularly unsatisfied in the excerpts of the women who belonged to the Bektashi tarikat. That is, they might have come across limits in expressing their identities as Muslims. However, the women with Sunni background also often had careful views concerning freedom of speech and what kind of harm it might produce if it remained entirely unlimited. Did the women experience this as a threat or were these opinions more results of the current use of freedom of speech to political or other purposes or linked to Islamic moral values?

Hanifa, who had a Sunni background, was of the opinion that one should think before speaking. When she was asked about how she

viewed freedom of religion and its current status she commented briefly: 'Is anyone satisfied[?]' (Hanifa) Khadija thought that she could talk and express herself freely and that she did not care so much about the other people's reactions. Khadija continued by saying that despite freedom of religion in the Republic of Macedonia the 'Bektashi community is not registered yet' and she considered this to be due to the unwillingness in the administrative and governmental structures to help the Bektashi community. She thought that the Bektashis were left outside the government and that the Sunnis used politics to protect their own interests. Even though she individually had the experience that freedom of religion existed, Khadija stated that from her point of view the Bektashi community was blocked and would need more freedom. (Khadija) From Khadija's perspective the situation regarding freedom of religion in the Republic of Macedonia was insufficient and she could not feel that her religious community was treated righteously. Even though she thought that at the individual level religion as a part of her identity had enough space, the larger context for religious practice, the Bektashi tarikat, suffered from a situation, which limited its existence. This supports Khadija's other statements regarding the difficult position of the Bektashis in the Republic of Macedonia.

Sabah, who was a Sunnite, by contrast with Khadija, saw the level of freedom of religion as good in Macedonian society. She said that there were differences in how people expressed their convictions, depending for example on whether their convictions were strong or weak (Sabah). Wafa, who was a member in the Bektashi tarikat, thought that freedom of religion was implemented in the Republic of Macedonia, and that she personally was satisfied with her part, 'but for others, I think that there, there is too many things, that they have to change' (Wafa). Farah on the other hand was satisfied when she said that: 'I think that it [freedom of religion] has never been touched' (Farah). Aida's experience was also that she was free to express her religion (Aida). Nawal thought that the situation was good and that people could choose freely to which community they belonged and how religious they wanted to be (Nawal). Fatima too felt that people were free to express their religiosity (Fatima). Aisha thought that the situation was now better than it had been; previously the freedom to express and practice religion did not exist in the same way (Aisha). Hawwa concluded: 'We are a democratic state and everyone has the right to choose its own religion and practise it [...] as for my point of view as a female it's good [...] we don't have any kind of limit, limitations [...]' (Hawwa).

Hawwa, however, raised the point that even though freedom of religion was written in the Macedonian constitution, it was not completely implemented. She thought that everyone should have every opportunity to practise their religion, as in any other democratic state. The women discussed the degree to which people were religious and their possibilities of showing this: how freedom of religion had improved over time and due to political changes. According to the women's experiences freedom of religion was both existant and non-existant. Hawwa also spoke about others than Christians and Muslims when it came to religious practice and thought that the general situation should be improved. It seemed that the women who had a Sunni background were more satisfied with the state of freedom of religion and their possibilities to show their identities as Muslims. Also, if the views of the Bektashi women were more inclined towards how their position was *vis-à-vis* the Muslim majority, the Sunnis tended to consider that the question of freedom of religion was in regard of the more the general state of things. However, Sunnite Hawwa, for instance, was not completely satisfied with the position all the religious groups had in the country.

Nawal considered that the situation, the context and the place defined where you could express what you thought about things related to religion (Nawal). Qadr was of the opinion that the people were free to express their religiosity. She did not regard these rights as limited and thought that people were free to believe in whatever they wanted. There had been a problem regarding the photos of veiled Muslim women in Macedonian passports, but that had been solved. (Qadr) Nowadays, Muslim women had the right to appear veiled on the ID photos (e.g. Amina; Zainab; Le Courrier des Balkans 2008a). Mahabba thought that there was freedom of religion, but she felt that when she practised her religion some people might wonder what she was doing and look at her weirdly. Mahabba wished that the freedom of religion would be improved so that everyone would be free to do what s/he wanted and could, and while implementing the right to practise religion, be respected by others. (Mahabba) Zainab thought that people in the Republic of Macedonia were in general free to express their religion, but this did not mean that there were no problems. In her view people who did not practise religion did not have a positive attitude towards those who did. Practising religion was not well received and people perceived those who did so as different, something that they did not appreciate. (Zainab) In these excerpts the Albanian women point out that despite freedom of religion, they could feel that their religiosity was not in all contexts well received and that one should



choose when and where it was correct to speak about religion and show that Islam was a part of one's identity.

Nuriya spoke about freedom of religion that Islam gave to believers. Each person could through free will find the right path, for example by reading the Qur'an. (Nuriya) When this issue in general is discussed the Qur'anic verse 2:256 is often quoted, where it is stated that there is no compulsion to religion; a thought that could explain Nuriya's view on Islamic freedom of religion. Amina thought that the person who was a Muslim was free. She was very satisfied with freedom of religion and the human rights Islam offered, but she could experience something different and not as satisfying on the part of Macedonian state when it came to human rights. (Amina) Thus, Amina felt that the human rights offered by the state remained uncomplete, while Islam provided them. She also stated, similar to Nuriya, that Muslims were free. According to Nuriya this meant particularly the kind of freedom the believers had in choosing Islam. For Amina Islam seemed to represent more freedom for her person and identity than the societal context could at all times offer.

### **Politics, Macedonian Society and Islam**

*NR: What political questions are currently actual in the society concerning religion?*

*Nawal: Who is going to be [a] member of the government [laughs].*

*NR and Nawal: [common laughter].*

*(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)*

What Nawal said here illustrates well one particular aspect of the prevailing societal circumstances, as it often seemed that 'everything was infected' by politics, even religious life. Krasniqi claims however that Islam has not been allowed on to the political scene, 'despite occasional attempts to politicize it and utilise it for political and nationalist expediency' (Krasniqi 2010, 31). This can be due to the particular social and political contexts or to the historical experience that forced the Albanian nation-builders to de-emphasize religion. The emphasized role Islam has for the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia could be linked to their minority position in a context in which religious and ethnic identities overlap. Currently Islam has politically and societally a bigger role, as the overall political and social context shapes developments and transformations of identities, including the religious ones. (Krasniqi 2010, 31)

Of the interviewed women Hanifa did not know what might be taking place between the governmental structures and Islam, but concluded: 'People aren't satisfied' (Hanifa). On the subject of governmental structures and religion Habiba said that 'there are some moments where they are divided, but there are moments when they are together' (Habiba). She also thought that occasionally the language of religion was used in order to achieve political goals and the political groups were trying to enact political problems through religion. (Habiba) Qadr and Aida did not see any connection between politics and religion. The latest public discussion concerning religion according to Qadr had concerned religious education in the schools (Qadr). Aida thought that one did not have to belong to a certain religious group in order to be a member of a political party or the opposite. However, sometimes you could see some Albanian politicians visit a mosque together. (Aida) Zainab did not see a connection between the different groups as such, but thought that there might be persons that could be members of both a political and some religious group. However, the situation was complicated and Zainab stated that her sources of information were insufficient. Furthermore she reckoned that Muslim groups were not connected with politics. (Zainab)

Even though many of the women (e.g. Aisha; Fatima; Zainab) thought that politics and religion were not interrelated, Amala had a different view as she stated: 'Here always was politic[s] included inside in religion', at least to some extent (Amala). Her opinion was that the two should be separated from one another and that religion should be placed more towards the private sphere. This was a better arrangement, according to her, as politics should be the same for everybody and serve everyone regardless of their confession. Religion, by contrast, could be kept as a private issue. (Amala) Concerning the possible connections between political and religious groups, Amala said:

*Amala [through an interpreter]: People are seeing you with a different eye [...] if you are not in in same religion with him [...] they are seeing you different [...] if you are not in same political party, they are seeing you different [...] the most is this with the political parties.  
(Amala, 35 years old, village dweller)*

Thus, the issue of belonging was, according to Amala, more emphasized when linked to one's membership of a political party, rather than to what was one's confession. Amala's position as regards the relation between religion and state could be seen as a sign of a certain kind of occidentalization of the Muslim identity (cf. Clayer 2001).

Aisha saw a societal problem that was related to both politics and religion in a more moral light:

*Aisha [through an interpreter]: [...] A problem like everyone aa promises and nothing is not realized [...] and as far as I know every, every religion teaches the person to [do] that what you promised, you realize. (Aisha, 25 years old, city dweller)*

Fatima did not see connections between politics and religion on the Islamic side, but thought that there was an influence between these aspects on the Christian side. She thought that Muslims should not be involved in political issues or use religion in order to gain political positions, as this was not 'the essence of Islam' (Fatima). The political parties in the Republic of Macedonia did not have religious principles or agendas and according to Fatima usually 'the nation issues' were used to gain political positions in the elections. (Fatima) Like Fatima, Hawwa thought that political problems were often related to ethnic questions: 'We are a state declared as a secular one, so the the organs, the state organs are separated from the religion, so the the religion has never influenced in any decision [...] done by them' (Hawwa). Politicians were mainly not religious and there was no connection between politics and religion. All in all: 'The politicians in Macedonia, they don't aa act or do like based on their religion' (Hawwa).

Some women considered however that the language of religion might be used to achieve political goals in the Republic of Macedonia (e.g. Amina; Mahabba). Amina saw the political role of religion as something distant. For her a connection between governmental and religious structures was difficult to imagine. However, she stated that the language of religion could be used 'for achieving votes or something' (Amina). Sabah said that politicians were active at election time and that their political campaign speeches might mention that they went to mosque in order to pray (Sabah). On the whole I would state that the interviewees considered connections between the religious and political lives to be relatively small in number and superficial or institutional in nature. Nonetheless, Amala, Wafa and Nawal, for instance, stated that these connections existed. Sabah and Amina thought that religion might be somehow used for political purposes. Khadija was of the opinion that the Sunni majority was connected with the politics in the country. Zainab thought that the actual religious and political groups were separate, but that there might be points of contacts at the individual level (Zainab). Aida's view was the opposite, as she considered that the administrative political and religious structures

might have mutual contacts, while people would be uninvolved in this (Aida).

Nawal stated that there was a connection and an influence between religion and power structures. She was not so satisfied with this and hoped, like Amala, that 'religion should be put aside, because the religion is something else and politics is something else' (Nawal). She did not however think that members of a certain political party would belong to only one religious group. Nawal considered that many things in the Republic of Macedonia should be changed and these also included religious matters. (Nawal) Mahabba, like Hawwa and Qadr, saw politics and Islam as two separate entities. According to her, the political structures were working entirely differently than Islam indicated. She was not satisfied with the situation and thought that maybe if some religious people actually were active in each political party or in the government, they could take things in the right direction. It was almost impossible for Mahabba to think that religion could be used, or abused, for political reasons 'but I could say that there are such a people, who use such a religious ways to take a position in the politics [...] so the reality is different' than what she saw as an ideal. (Mahabba) Amina thought that everybody should work for the society and not prioritize either the private or collective interests, as they are equal. She considered that Islam and governmental structures could support each other and wished that there would be cooperation between them. According to her and the literature she had read, conventions, for example regarding work and even human rights could be traced to the Islamic principles, rules and Islamic law, sharia. (Amina)

Farah did not assume that religion on the Albanian side was used to achieve political goals, but thought that on the Macedonian side there would be such tendencies when voting in elections or supporting aims such as the building of a church or the House of Mother Teresa in the centre of Skopje. The heated public discussion during my field-work concerning the reconstruction of a historical Orthodox church in the Skopje city centre had led to objections from the Muslim side and the Muslims wanted to rebuild a mosque that had previously also been located in the centre (Farah). There were demonstrations against the building of the church in which Macedonians, particularly the students and young people, also participated. (Field diary)

Amina reflected on the status of religion in Macedonian society and reckoned that interest in religion was increasing within the Muslim community, but that on the Orthodox side there might be a growing number of atheists (Amina). Zainab did not have information about the situation on the Macedonian side. However she had the image that Macedonians were not so interested in religion and that it was not so important for them. Zainab thought that maybe matters such as the NATO and Europe were considered to be more interesting topics than religion for the Macedonians, even though these admittedly were interesting for the Albanians too. (Zainab) According to Farah the Macedonians celebrated every religious holiday included in their tradition. She thought that this probably indicated that they were religious, paid attention to religious holidays and went to church especially at Christmas and Easter. In general Farah was of the opinion that interest in religion in the Republic of Macedonia was increasing. (Farah) Also Nawal considered that the Macedonians, as well as 80% of the Albanians gave a lot of space to religion in their lives and that the interest in religion in general was increasing (Nawal). Qadr said that people who lived in multicultural and multireligious places should pay more attention to and increasingly acknowledge that people came from different religious backgrounds and avoid offending each other. She thought that more careful behaviour was called for in these circumstances. (Qadr)

The Albanian women tended more often to perceive religion and politics in the Republic of Macedonia as separate entities. However, there were some women who thought that a connection between these existed and that for the common good religion should be placed in the private sphere, where people could find a place for their religious identities. There were also doubts that religion could be abused for political ends. Some of the Albanian women had a more ideal picture of how Islam could be integrated into the society as an ingredient, which could improve the societal circumstances. The developments that the women could perceive regarding the religiosity of the Albanian and Macedonian groups seemed to mirror each other to some extent. It was suggested that religiosity and religion among Macedonians was becoming less significant, or the opposite; was increasing remarkably. At the same time the women saw in the Albanian group that the interest in religion was in most cases on the increase. When speaking about religion in this light the women's narratives tended to speak about the religious identities, which the Albanians formed in relation to the state, but also negotiated between different groups. Also, what kind of relationship there was between religion and politics/the

state could have a role in how the women perceived Muslim identity and their identities as Muslims. They had differing opinions as to where this identity should be placed: some wished to keep it private and others wanted it to be actively involved in the societal interplay.

### **Islamic and Ethnic Experiences of Otherness**

Regarding the developments within Macedonian society, Brunnbauer considers that since 1944 recruitment patterns especially for administrative jobs have benefitted the Slavic population. This trend aimed at fostering the creation of a Macedonian nation. However, it was also related to the higher level of education the Macedonian people often had. Working for the state could give a sense of personal investment in the existence of a Macedonian federal republic and later on a state. (Brunnbauer 2002, 12; cf. Poulton 1991, 77–82) Thus, the minorities remained for a longer period of time underrepresented in the administration, government and industry. When land became increasingly scarce many rural Albanian men left as labour migrants to Western Europe. And Albanian political and intellectual aspirations were often more focussed on Prishtina than Skopje. The declaration of independence of the Macedonian state in 1991 changed the situation for the Albanian population, as they received a much higher representation in the political bodies than before and started to claim their rights within the state the Macedonians saw as ‘theirs’. The repressive measures that the Socialist Republic of Macedonia imposed in the 1980s upon the Albanian population influenced later political attitudes and strengthened the historically already existing experiences of discrimination and alienation. (Brunnbauer 2002, 12–13)

Of the women interviewed Amina mentioned that in the Republic of Macedonia there had been some limitations regarding the use of languages in the institutions and religion in schools (Amina; cf. Poulton 1991, 81). Zainab said that Albanian children often went to Albanian schools, while for example the Bosnians would frequent the Macedonian schools (Zainab), most likely for linguistic reasons. A group with limited rights was, according to Amina, the Roma. She mentioned that the Albanians had been in a similar position too, with limited rights, and maybe still were. Amina also commented the state’s relations with different groups: ‘I see that the state is not righteous, it’s not working equal for all the people’ regardless of their nationality or mother tongue (Amina). Amina explained that according to Islam people should be treated equally no matter which religion, for example, or

language group they belonged to, because 'we are all created by the same God' (Amina). In these excerpts Zainab described an issue that most probably strengthened the respective identities of different societal groups; a school system which was organized according to one's mother tongue. Amina's thoughts were that the rights of the Albanians in general had improved, but that the group of Roma was still in a difficult position. Thus, she thought that not all group identities were fully acknowledged by the state and considered that Islam could offer another kind of framework, in which all were treated equally regardless of their religion and mother tongue.

Farah said that minority issues had been topical for Albanians in 2001 and thought that maybe in some parts of the country they still were an issue (Farah). Zainab explained that because Albanians had felt that they could not exercise their rights there had been a war<sup>92</sup> in the Republic of Macedonia. She considered, however, that nowadays she as an Albanian could not say that she felt her rights were limited. Neither did she consider that women would be in a particularly bad position regarding their rights. Instead Zainab thought that maybe homosexuals felt themselves somewhat limited or marginalized in Macedonian society. (Zainab) Farah, like Amina and Fatima, was in the current circumstances more worried about the Roma population than the Albanian one, as these people did not have any state body to look after their interests and rights. Farah was concerned as she saw of the Roma that 'they live in misery' (Farah). She thought that the state should intervene so that the basic needs and human rights would be guaranteed to people without economic support or to children without parents and a home, so that these people would be able to survive. Farah also said that she was touched by and concerned about these kinds of problems, even in the cases when it did not involve the Republic of Macedonia. (Farah) Farah, Amina and Fatima mentioned the situation of Roma, which made them concerned. For Zainab the marginalized group might be homosexuals, not ethnic groups. The societal position of the Albanians concerned these women less, even though the situation could vary from location to location. According to these views the Albanian identities of the women were in that secure position that the women could even be interested in issues regarding other societal groups, as the situation of their own group seemed rather stable. Zainab stated furthermore that as an Albanian and a woman her posi-

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<sup>92</sup> Some people speak of war, sometimes the term armed conflict is used.

tion was relatively good. Thus, the local context did not challenge her identity as an Albanian woman that much.

Hawwa thought, somewhat differently than Farah, Fatima and Zainab, that the Albanian population had always had somewhat limited rights. Even in the current circumstances some of the rights that should belong to the Albanian population were still, according to her, limited and the process of change was ongoing. Hawwa mentioned moreover the situation in which the Roma community lived and said that this was common not only to the Republic of Macedonia, but extended all over Europe. (Hawwa) Hanifa spoke about the relationship between Albanians and Macedonians, and stated that Macedonians considered Albanians to be a minority and that they, the Macedonians, tended to speak a lot about the status Albanian women had and that these narrative images were different from the reality (Hanifa). Both Hawwa and Hanifa looked at the situation from a more reserved perspective than the women above. According to Hawwa, Albanians were in a position in which they still had to defend themselves and their identities. When speaking about the situation of another group, the Roma, she saw their discriminatory situation as more extended and beyond borders. That is, for the Albanians the challenging circumstances could be localized in the Republic of Macedonia, while the Roma also suffered discriminatory measures in other societal contexts outside the Macedonian state. Hanifa's comment concerning the opinions the Macedonians had regarding the Albanians and the Albanian women could be an example of stereotyping, which she felt to be imposed on her from the side of the Macedonians. These were stereotypes in which Hanifa could not recognize herself, as the reality for her was different and her identity as an Albanian woman did not correspond to them.

Qadr, who lived in a village and worked in the city, pointed out that sometimes she felt as though she belonged in a sense to two different places and even countries, due to the cultural differences. She wished that more attention would be given to questions such as the menus on social occasions, often linked to her work, in which Muslims were invited as guests:



*Qadr: They [Macedonians] never invited [...] Albanians and Muslims, so they [Macedonians], they serve pork all the time.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Qadr: Which for me [in] one way is the discrimination [...] I don't know, how should I, yeah, understand that, as discrimination.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Qadr: You know, because you go [to] the the cocktail, you are invited, you get pork, you don't eat that so you stay [...] hungry all the time.*

*(Qadr, 27 years old, village dweller)*

This could be interpreted as a difficulty faced by Qadr, who as a Muslim struggled to express her religion in the public sphere. This kind of context, in which the Muslim identity became meaningful through negative differentiation, which Qadr described as discriminatory, religious identity could acquire more emphasis and further negative feelings of otherness. It also put the person in a position in which she in a way defended her religious identity and conviction, as she did not eat while others did.

Even though the women predominantly found that there was freedom of religion in Macedonian society, there were doubts about how general opinion would position itself *vis-à-vis* public religious practice. Some interviewees for instance reflected on the opportunities that Muslim women who covered themselves in a way considered to be Islamic experienced in respect of being employed in the society. Amina thought that there was a problem linked to the clothing of a Muslim woman:

*Amina [through an interpreter]: If she works in institutions, government institutions, with the veil, will she be able or have right to work there, and exactly right now they have been accepting the law about making pictures [...] [for] the passport with the veil.*

*(Amina, 23 year old, village dweller)*

Amina was doubtful regarding the possibilities of employment even though the law accepting the Islamic veil in the ID photos had passed and could be an indication of a more flexible way of orienting with respect to the issues related to the Islamic religious life on the part of the state. Thus, there was some suspicion regarding the state's attitudes towards the construction and public manifestations of a Muslim identity of a woman. Some women also felt that religious people were viewed differently from others (Mahabba; Zainab). Nawal mentioned that difficulties in being employed by the state affected Albanians and other ethnic groups as minorities:

*Nawal: If you go in the state's [...] bureaus for example [...] you can see that 90 percent are Macedonian employees [...] only 10 percent you can find from the other nationalities [...] and I don't think that, it's good that.*

*(Nawal, 35 year old, city dweller)*

Furthermore Nawal hoped that people would be employed according to their capacities and qualities, not according to their nationality or ethnic belonging. Discrimination could take place also within some bodies and institutions and be, for instance, motivated by the appearance of a person, who was recognizably Albanian. Nawal concluded: 'Someone [...] who is working in that organization is treating him as a animal, I don't feel good [...] I think it's wrong [...] you should see man as a man, not his nationality or his religion' (Nawal).

Brunnbauer states that despite the fact that the Albanian parties have been active in the Macedonian government since 1992, improvements for their voters have been rather slow. After the independence the Albanians remained underrepresented in all fields of the formal economy. This, according to Brunnbauer, could not be exhaustively explained by their lower qualifications or more rural lifestyles, but rather as the result of ethnically discriminatory recruitment patterns. (Brunnbauer 2002, 13) The situation has however improved and been supported by the Ohrid Framework Agreement's conditions (cf. Ragaru 2008, 48; Report by the Commissioner for Human Rights 2008, 21–22), even though work still remains to be done. The women interviewed could, however, feel their identities being challenged as Muslims (e.g. Mahabba; Qadr) and as Albanians (e.g. Hawwa; Nawal) in the Macedonian context.

Macedonians and Albanians tended in general not to have much contact with each other. Instead they 'read different newspapers, go to different primary and secondary schools, listen to different radio stations and watch different TV-programs' (Brunnbauer 2002, 16). Macedonians also rarely spoke the Albanian language, while most Albanians did speak, at least to some degree, Macedonian. The perceptions that both groups had of each other were marked by prejudices and Macedonians could also express anti-Islamic sentiments regarding the overwhelmingly Muslim Albanians and vice versa. Different ethnic groups also often portrayed each other as a homogeneous masses despite the divisions within them, which could become manifest for

example in political life. (Cf. Brunnbauer 2002, 16) Amin Maalouf sees the communitarianism these above-mentioned features seem to speak for as a negation of the very idea of citizenship. His view is sharply critical as he estimates that no civilized political and democratic system could be established on communitarianism. Hence, in order not to divide a nation into adversary tribes, citizens should each feel themselves to be represented within society without introduction of some kind of pernicious quota system. (Maalouf 2009, 58)

Of the women interviewed, Aida had experienced discrimination in her youth as she had attended a Macedonian school and had been the only Albanian there. This school had been chosen because it had better teachers than the Albanian one. Aida struggled with her grades, but knew that she would receive a higher quality of education. Reflecting on it now, she thought that with time and despite these experiences she had found her place in Macedonian society and felt very good about it. (Aida) Nuriya studied currently at a Macedonian-language university and felt that she was somehow 'left behind' by the others in the faculty. She could not say why she felt like this and thought that maybe it had to do with her own spirit towards others, which perhaps had not been friendly and open minded enough. However, she said that she felt great within her circle of friends and in the context of the NGO she was active in. (Nuriya) These environments were mostly frequented by Albanians and Muslims. Habiba was of the opinion that sometimes legislation in the country benefitted Macedonians more than Albanians (Habiba). Hawwa said that she did not see any obstacles to her functioning in society, but doubted that there might be dominant stereotypes 'on the other side', thus, among Macedonians. This was, in her view, due to the fact that: 'I am a Muslim, they always have prejudices' (Hawwa). She wanted to change the current circumstances so that stereotypes and prejudices about her religion would be erased and that there would be reciprocal respect between different religions. (Hawwa) In these excerpts the women spoke about some of their own life experiences and opinions as Albanians and as Muslims in Macedonian society. There were doubts that they as Albanians might be in some kind of a weaker position in relation to legislation or social contexts, or that there were stereotypes that were directed towards them. Both of these were factors that could, and most likely did, play a role in the identity construction of the women, as they might support the ideas of otherness and societal marginalization.

## **Islam in the Lives of Albanian Women – (Re-)Entering the Public Sphere**

Since the beginning of the 1990s and the democratization process many issues related to public Islamic religious life have changed and led into its re-organization. More concretely this has meant in the Republic of Macedonia that new mosques have been built, new school establishments have been constructed, and Islamic scholars have been guaranteed freedom of expression. There is also an increased quantity of Islamic publications available, both locally produced and in translation; religious programmes have reached different media channels, humanitarian and charitable organizations of Islamic backgrounds have been established and religious spaces have become more prominent in the public sphere. (Cf. Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 41; Iseni 2007a, 27)

Despite the political ideology of socialism Islam never completely left the Macedonian public sphere, as religious buildings for instance, remained a part of it. Secularization of the Muslim populations and the weakness of Islamic institutions have however characterized Islamic religious life due to the impact of decades of socialist governance. As a consequence there have been plenty of defects to be rectified. Many of the religious buildings and premises have been abandoned, and there has been a shortage of people with religious education at the higher administrative levels; moreover the falling into the disfavour of certain ulema has led to internal divisions within the Islamic communities of the successor countries of the former Yugoslavia. Also the still ongoing restitution of the religious communities' property, which had been confiscated under socialism and a lack of religious education have affected the religious life. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 42)

The development of an Islamic revival has however been relatively fast in terms of infrastructure and religious activities (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 10). Despite the fact that religion often remains a communitarian juncture, it is increasingly lived and expressed at the individual level in the Balkan states (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 42) and there is an on going process of diversification of religious practice and individualization of faith. Bougarel points out, however, that these developments have not in general increased the religiosity of the people, even though the visibility of Islam has increased due to restored religious freedom and the political and national awakening of the Balkan Muslims. New religious actors tend to fracture the monopoly on religious life that Islamic institutions have traditionally had. Attempts

to nationalize Islam have not stopped diversity in questions related to Islam and the Islamic practices from increasing (Bougarel 2005, 26–27). Somewhat contrary to Bougarel's opinion, most of the women and other people I spoke to in the fieldwork stated that interest in Islam in general was increasing in the Republic of Macedonia. The women interviewed also pointed out that decisions concerning religious practice and values seemed to be made more and more at the individual level; aspects that supported Bougarel's views on the individualization of the faith. For instance Habiba, who came from a Sunni background and had married a Bektashi man, said that faith for her was a private matter that she cherished according to her own wishes and it gave her a personal, spiritual satisfaction (Habiba). As for decision-making and religious conviction Khadija, who was from a Sunni family and had discovered the Bektashi path, highlighted the significance love had in her choices:

*Khadija [through an interpreter]: I like the path, the road [...] nobody is forcing me [...] I am doing that with my, my love [...] since I met Baba Mondj<sup>93</sup> [...] I am more deep in the road of Bektashism [...] then I loved more the path [...] and this religion.  
(Khadija, 53 years old, village dweller)*

What seemed important to Khadija was to mention that her choices regarding religious life were her own, and that she had been guided on her way by a Bektashi baba, whose contribution to the process of Khadija's identification with the Bektashi path had been significant. Her description conveys an image of religiosity in which feelings were very much involved. The general emphasis placed on inner meaning rather than outer convention can endow to the Bektashi practices with a good degree of liberality. Sunni religious leaders and Muslims may sometimes be scandalized at the indifference that the Bektashis seem to show towards some of the tenets of mainstream Islam. (Clayer 1990, 88; Elsie 2001, 30–31; Norton 2001, 174) Despite the slight differences in their religious backgrounds, Habiba and Khadija seemed both, however, to place their religiosities and decisions related to their religious identities more in to the private sphere than to public one.

In the following discussion Zahra, who had a mixed religious background and feelings of not belonging to the Albanian community in the Republic of Macedonia, reflected on how she saw Islam as having both collective and private aspects:

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<sup>93</sup> The spiritual leader of the Bektashi Community in the Republic of Macedonia.

NR: *So would you consider religion or religiosity to be a private matter or a collective collective factor?*

Zahra: *I think it's a private matter.*

NR: *And could you tell me like why do you consider it, that it is that way, do you have an opinion about that why do you feel it's that way?*

Zahra: *Because I I don't need pressure from anybody [...] it's my private aa world and aa how I feel [...] maybe collectively...*

NR: *Hmh [nodding].*

Zahra: *But I don't agree with everything okay? If they tell me something this this this, I have my own things [...] like I said I am not too religious okay? I believe in God, I believe in lot of things in our religion but aa I still have my own private thoughts.*

*(Zahra, 59 years old, village dweller)*

Zahra distanced herself from mainstream Islamic interpretations and reserved space for her own views on religion (cf. Clayer 2001, the orientation that aims at rejection of Islam). This might be related to her negotiations of religious identity, which she partly experienced as being validated by the mainstream Islamic worldview, but also, maybe in the local context, at times challenged and laborious to identify with. Zahra stated clearly that she did not need the feeling of being under pressure of some kind when it came to Islam. For her Islam was related to her own world, which included her feelings and thoughts. This emotionally-tied aspect was something that also stood out clearly in the excerpts of the interviews above with Khadija and Habiba and in that way suggested that Islam for these women belonged more to the personal sphere of experiences. Mahabba's view on the same issue was by contrast quite different, as she thought that religion was offered and accessible to all people equally and therefore it could not be a private issue. Mahabba, who was a younger woman, also pointed out, when asked about the differences in religious practice between the generations, the significance that each person's own interpretation of religious literature had on their understanding of religious issues:

*Mahabba [through an interpreter]: She [Mahabba] thinks that there are such a different ways of perceiving and treating the religion and aa she [Mahabba] says so 'cause there are different kinds of readers and literature and everyone can read their own way and permeate it in their own way 'cause everyone has a different kinds of perceptions and a standing and thoughts.*

*(Mahabba, 24 years old, village dweller)*

For Mahabba, identification with a larger Islamic community might be of greater importance than to Habiba, Khadija or Zahra. In her view Islam was given to everyone equally and everyone had his or her own

interpretations of how to live according to it. However, despite the emphasis Mahabba put on the collective aspect of religion, the individual view was also acknowledged and given room in her interpretation.

Farah for her part perceived the issue of the collective and private dimensions of Islam as relatively all-embracing and her view revealed impressions gained from Islamic mysticism:

*Farah: [Religion is] a collective factor definitely [...] so you and me, we are good together, we form "us," usually in our religion there is no like, aa thee I don't know, have you read thee aa Jalal ad-Din Rumi, Rumi.*

*NR: Rumi?*

*Farah: Yeah.*

*NR: I've read some things, yes.*

*Farah: There is no "me", there is no "ego" [...] there is always "you" for both persons, "you," you know, that includes "us."*

*NR: Yeah?*

*Farah: It's always a collective factor.*

*(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

The ideas that Farah referred to were those of the Islamic mystic Rumi, whose wish to be at one with God, or at least have an experience of such unity, aimed at making the ego vanish, so that the believer could be fulfilled again and vanish in 'you', meaning God (cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2002, 33). Farah had a Sunni background, but was clearly inspired to show respect to Islamic traditions more broadly. Farah emphasized the collective aspect of her religious identity; sharing and finding unity in God with others, were aims which had a central place in her religiosity. The Islamic scholar Wadud's thoughts regarding the unity that could be found in Islam overlapped with Farah's. According to Wadud, opposing principles were actually an illusion of separation between self and other; at the transcendent level Allah was the tension that held them in juxtaposition and they formed one single divine reality (Wadud 2007, 29).

Of the women Aida, by contrast with Farah and Mahabba, perceived her religiosity as something private. She thought that if religion was something collective one would like to share it with others and therefore maybe expand it. These kinds of developments were not important to Aida, who described her Islamic religiosity as follows: 'for me it's what I am [...] and what I like to stay and respect' (Aida). It was her experience that in order to live this out, she did not have to be part of a community. (Aida) For Aida Islam seemed to be of

great importance when it came to her perception of herself and self-understanding. It was also a significant aspect of her self-presentation as she thought of Islamic religiosity as something that she herself was and wanted to respect. The more social aspect of religiosity seemed to mean for Aida somehow addressing Islam to others, which she did not want to be involved in, preferring Muslim identity to be situated more in the private sphere. These views of the women formed a mosaic of interpretations and the differentiation between them seemed in some way to be tied to the generation the respective woman belonged to. The older generations placed less emphasis on the collective meanings of their religious experience and identity, while for the younger women these often seemed to be a more significant part of their Muslim identities.

To sum up, important societal changes have seemingly also taken place in the more personal sphere of the Islamic life in Macedonian society. The women's narratives showed a kind of a two-way movement, as religion seemed to be breaking out of the individual sphere where it was mainly situated during the socialist era – when the obligations to the state were often put before religious obligations, even by the religious authorities. Now Islamic religious practice was demonstrably reaching the public sphere and Islam was becoming more visible within it. (Cf. Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 6; Bringa 1995, 199–200) At the same time interpretations of and decisions regarding Islam and Islamic ways of living were being taken at more individual level.

### **Women in Mosques, Medreses, Tekkes and Türbes**

In recent years the Republic of Macedonia has seen an important number of mosques being built alongside the mainly Orthodox churches. Some have even considered this development as a sort of 'marking of territory' on behalf of the most important religious communities – the Islamic and the Orthodox Christian (cf. Iseni 2007a, 33). There have also been heated debates over the justifications for building a mosque and/or a church in Skopje city centre (e.g. Farah; Zainab), a place that carries an important symbolic meaning. National identities are often linked to territorial claims (cf. Lehti 2009), which might manifest themselves in this kind of marking of the territories through building churches and mosques. The construction of mosques has introduced the prayer call, *ezan*, to a larger variety of places. This has at times been appreciated, but also criticized, depending on the religious or ethnic background of the person, for instance, or his/her opinions



concerning both Albanians and Muslims. However, it is clear that Islam in the Republic of Macedonia is more discernible than before.

Regarding the religious premises Khadija wanted changes as to the accessibility of spaces for the religious practice of the Bektashis. As religiously topical issues in society, she brought forward matters that embodied some of the problematic aspects related to internal divisions within the Muslim community, as well as state versus religious communities relations. Khadija was upset because Sunni Muslims used the premises of a tekke for their purposes and she described her wish for:

*Khadija [through an interpreter]: The Sunni Muslims to go out of the tekke [...] and the state to bring back, to bring, to give the property back to Bektashi community.*

*NR: And is this the tekke, which is in Tetova?*

*Khadija: Yeah, yes [...] and even...*

*[Interpreter speaks in Albanian about the mosque inside the tekke]*

*Khadija: Even inside, in the tekke they usurpate [...] building, and they are praying over there like it's mosque [...] which one is not mosque [...] and there is no mosque inside.*

*(Khadija, 53 years old, village dweller)*

This excerpt illustrates the still continuing struggle that religious communities have had to face, as not all religious premises have been returned to their original use. Khadija also raised the issue of friction between the Sunnis and the Bektashis, which manifested itself in a more concrete way in the disagreements between the communities on the use of the Harabati Baba tekke's premises in Tetovo. Until now, the tekke and the buildings related to it were divided between the two communities, something that upset the Bektashis, as the tekke was not a mosque. Currently, however, a part of it functions as such. Also, the Bektashis do not practice the prayer in the same manner as do the Sunnis, so the prayer call reaching the tekke five times a day from a short distance may be experienced as irritating. Furthermore, on Fridays the tekke-mosque received a relatively large number of Sunni believers. (Field diary) For Khadija the negotiations of her identity as a Muslim took concrete dimensions in the discussion regarding the

religious premises and their use. As a Muslim following the Bektashi path, she felt her religiosity and religious identity to be limited by the Sunni community and their ways of functioning.

Six of the Albanian women interviewed expressed a wish for an increased availability of dedicated spaces for prayer and some (e.g. Hawwa; Qadr) mentioned that they were to some extent struggling internally, as women, to enter the mosques. Until recently, these had been very male-dominated areas (cf. McGuire 2008, 108). More opportunities for religious practice in the public sphere were sought by some of the women, in such places as libraries and universities, or other places visited frequently by people (e.g. Mahabba) This would increase the equality of access and facilitate the accessibility.

*Zainab: I would like to have a moscow [mosque] here in my faculty [...] and aa when I want to pray, I can go there and not to run in my house to do that [...] because they have a church [near the faculty], I like a Muslim, I will want to have a moscow [mosque] for me.*

*NR: Hm.*

*Zainab: But we don't have.*

*(Zainab 25 years old, city dweller)*

The wish of Zainab and other women to have more places in which to pray could be related to their willingness to also live out their religious identities and religiosities more socially. It might also indicate something about identification which emphasized the Muslim identity in a secular and/or predominantly non-Muslim society. In Khadija's case the willingness to have more space and recognition for her identity as a Muslim was seen in relation to the Sunni Muslims and manifested in her thoughts about the use of religious space in the tekke in Tetovo. The number of environments consecrated for religious practice was, however, considered to be satisfactory by seven of the interviewed women. A desire for increased acknowledgement of the religious needs of Muslims emerged in my material in different ways. Women wished that they could dedicate more time for religious practice in everyday life. Some also stated that factors such as a social life and the 'need of religion' had an influence on their willingness and opportunities to give time to religion (Qadr; Aida). Qadr for instance said that in her current circumstances she had less time, because of all the obligations she had in her life. She worked and had other duties too and this influenced her chances of finding time for religious practice. Qadr thought that people in general were striving to have better incomes and a better life, and 'so you don't have very much time to [...] commit with religion' (Qadr). Qadr worked actively and had a

very practical point of view; making a living and striving for a better quality of life limited the amount of space Islam could have in her life.

Amina was satisfied with the quantity of the mosques, but wished that the library of the university that she used regularly would have a place where she could go to pray (Amina). Aida for her part thought that there were enough spaces for her religious practice. Similar to Zainab, the mosque community was important to Aida even though her religious practice mainly took place at home. Aida would go to the mosque only on special occasions, such as if somebody died. (Aida). Zainab and Wafa thought that the state should invest more in maintaining the religious premises, so that also women would have the possibility to do the ritual wash, *wudu*, for example, before entering the mosque as Zainab emphasized (Wafa; Zainab).

Zainab, who was originally from a village, but now lived in the city, also said that there were regional differences when it came to the conditions of the mosques. She wished that the old mosques in Skopje would be in a better state of repair and could provide hot water. In her home village the situation was different and the mosques were better maintained, even though they, according to Zainab, were less frequented by people. Zainab also thought that the people of the mosque community were not that important to her. When she had time she prayed in the mosque, but it was not important who was present, or on which day she went to the mosque. (Zainab) Hanifa mentioned that the mosques were inherently connected to the religious life of the Muslims as the places of prayer. She did not, however, visit the mosque very often and in general she was not very satisfied with the prevailing circumstances when stating that 'there's not enough places [for prayer]' (Hanifa). Hence, she wished that things would change. (Hanifa) Aisha thought that the number of mosques was not satisfactory in the area where she lived. This had furthermore an impact on the chances of receiving Islamic education, as it was at the mosques that the children learned to read the Qur'an, she said. (Aisha) Thus, what the women mentioned about the public Islamic spaces illustrated their negotiations of space in the public sphere as Muslims from different groups and living in diverse locations. This access to space could also influence the childrens' opportunities to receive a religious education. Many of these Albanian women's views implied a desire for recognition of Muslim identities in the public sphere.

As to Islamic religious practice among the Albanians, consciousness of gender differences could be perceived in the modest visibility of

women in the public places for religious practice, particularly in the mosques. The tekkes seemed to be more frequented by them, for example on the occasions when women visited *türbes*, or came to meet with the baba. Followers of the Bektashi path could come to a tekke to have a traditional, so-called dervishes' coffee, which included a conversation with the baba and if so wished, a visit to the türbe. There one could address a prayer to the deceased members of the tarikat. Also, some of the Bektashi rituals related to rites of passage were organized for the initiated, as well as public reunions known as *muhabet*<sup>94</sup>. Men and women were unsegregated at these gatherings. (Clayer 1990, 82 and 89; Field diary) However, these images of accessibility of Islamic spaces were challenged by one particular experience I had in the field, when I visited the famous 'colourful mosque' known in Albanian as Xhamia e Larme or Xhamia e Pashës in Tetovo. In the mosque's yard I was surrounded by a group of girls who came out of the building once they had finished their Islamic studies for that day. It was one of the girls who had the key to the mosque itself and this made possible also my visit to this Islamic space. (Field diary)

The follower of the Bektashi path, Khadija, visited tekke two or three times a week and wished she could do so even more often (Khadija). Wafa, who also had found the Bektashi tarikat, initially mentioned the visits to a tekke, but said that she also went to other sacred places including churches and such. She stated that religion for her was a very private matter and that nobody forced her practice it: 'Whenever I feel, I go' (Wafa). During her visits, she lit candles in the tekke. (Wafa) Amala who had a mixed religious background, like Wafa, said that she visited both, tekkes and mosques, but did not do this very often (Amala). Going to a mosque was a central part of the religious practice of some interviewees, who had a Sunni background (e.g. Amina; Mahabba; Hanifa). Amina said that if possible, she went to mosque every day. Otherwise she prayed at home. (Amina) For her and Nuriya praying in a mosque had a special feeling. Nuriya, however, visited the mosque rarely. (Amina; Nuriya) Zahra did not go to a mosque at all and could therefore not estimate the accessibility of prayer spaces (Zahra).

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<sup>94</sup> During muhabet (a Turkish word, meaning love, affection, attachment, friendship) the participants sing, discuss, exchange ideas and the baba or the dervish can explain to the followers issues related to the Bektashi practices and beliefs. Baba can sing or recite some verses from the Qur'an and teach afterwards. Part of the tradition is also to consume *raki* (strong brandy). (Clayer 1990, 82)

Farah prayed five times daily at home, often with her mother. It was difficult to gather all the members of the family for the prayer, as they all had their own schedules. (Farah) Habiba felt that she did not have time to go to a particular religious place or institution and therefore she did her religious practice at home. However, she was aware of the opportunities to visit such places or premises, where one could learn more about Islam, such as a medrese or a library (Habiba). Sabah and Nawal did not go to the places for religious practice at all. They thought, however, that there was enough supply of these kinds of premises. (Sabah; Nawal) For Aisha the mosque community was important and to be active within it included praying there (Aisha).

It might be that women who were satisfied with the quantity of prayer spaces might use them less frequently and therefore be less aware of their actual number, or they might live and work in areas where the selection of Islamic religious spaces met their particular needs. Some women expressed a wish for more places of prayer in areas where many people passed by, or in general, so that the distance to reach prayer spaces would be shorter. All in all the religious practice in the public religious spaces seemed to be linked to the personal willingness and even practical possibilities of the women. The public spaces for religious practice could be thought of as places where the women negotiated and defended their identities as Muslims and as women.

Until now particularly Muslim women's religious practice has been located mainly in the private sphere, but things have also changed. The mosques, which have predominantly been men's spheres, had started to be visited more by female believers. Mahabba for instance went to a mosque to pray even though she mentioned that women seldom did so in the Republic of Macedonia. She also found time to pray at home and in the locality of an organisation she visited occasionally. (Mahabba) Farah thought that the mosque had a levelling effect, as it gathered Muslims from all social classes and made them feel equality and share a sense of unity in one 'believing body':

*Farah: It's a place where the rich and the poor gets the same [...] as I said the Muslim the the community at the mosque is that the best thing that everyone is equal you know.*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Farah: You are from the same body.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Farah: No matter where you are, you come and knee[l]s and you fell on the ground, only to one person, only to one sorry, estagfirullah [I seek forgiveness from Allah], to one God.*

*NR [smiling]: Yeah.*

*Farah: That makes you equal with everyone.*

*(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

One reference person explained that the relatively modest visibility of women in public prayer spaces was due to the need of separate prayer spaces, also within the mosques, which the accommodation of the women's religious practice would demand. At present it would be difficult to meet these needs. (Interview 12) Hawwa however thought that more important issues were related to the general mentality of the people, as it somehow 'reserved' the public prayer space for men, even though women were not prohibited from entering it:

*Hawwa [through an interpreter]: As a praying, doing a namaz.*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Hawwa: It's a essential thing of being a Muslim, so I usually do that prayer at home, aa it's not that, it's, we have mosques for praying, but still I would like to change the [...] I still haven't come to the point [...] to push down, to press down those barriers like the mentality [...] of our people that, it's not how to say, how to describe it, it's not a shame to go [...] the female to the mosque to pray, but I still have not come to the point to go at the mosque and pray together with them [...].*

*(Hawwa, 22 years old, city dweller)*

In this excerpt Hawwa expressed her willingness to go against the cultural norm, which she did not consider to be Islamic. However, she was hesitant about taking this step. This could be due to considerable social pressure and traditional ways of functioning, which were rarely challenged. For Hawwa this experience embodied a meeting point or a conflict of some kind between her nationally- or culturally-tied and religious identities.

Nawal, who defined herself as a religiously liberal Muslim, recalled that she had been in a mosque only twice, but also said that 'here for

example the womens are not going to the mosque' (Nawal). Also Qadr mentioned that 'mosque community in our community, like the [that] part, are more role of the mens [smiles] [...] so the womens are not very much in engaged you know in the mosque, even the prays and stuffs like that, you have to do at home' (Qadr). With respect to issues linked to Muslim women's access to the public space, the Islamic scholar Wadud views the prevailing situation in the Islamic cultural sphere as follows:

*[W]omen continue to be either marginalized or excluded because Muslim men, including many of those who consider themselves progressive, assume and maintain authority not only based on their interpretation of those [Islamic] sources, but also because the conception of the public domain of an Islamic paradigm still focuses upon a fixed center in public space as predominantly defined and inhabited by men.*  
(Wadud 2007, 8)

This view embraces possibilities for a deeper understanding also in the Macedonian Islamic context. In a sense the public space was 'reserved' for the men (cf. Keinänen 2010; EWIC 2006, 6), even though it should also belong to women. However, mosques were often sites where gender disparity became visible spatially; women should pray at the rear or in a place invisible to the leader of the prayer. Also, women might have, at least occasionally, limited opportunities and access to participation in diverse mosque activities. Wadud argues that liability of mosque design and its usage reflect time and space. Therefore, '[t]his makes the mosque an important site to initiate change and mark transitions in the context of Muslim community' (Wadud 2007, 174–175; cf. Keinänen 2010, 23 and 25–28). According to Wadud, there is nothing essentially Islamic about the separation of the genders in the mosque and it 'is neither a matter of faith nor a principle of Islamic dogma and creed' (Wadud 2007, 175). Gender separation in ritual worship is in many cases a reflection of social customs and Wadud links this to the development of those customs that followed the advent of Islam in the seventh century Arabia (Wadud 2007, 176). Thus, more frequent visits of the Albanian Muslim women to the mosques could therefore be interpreted as one sign of religious transition in the Republic of Macedonia and a manifestation of their identity construction as both Muslims and women in the public sphere.

For many of the Albanian women interviewed the opportunities to go to the mosque were related to the programme of the day and more practical issues. Where women prayed and whether they had the chance to do so depended on the context they were in at the time of

the prayer call (e.g. Mahabba; Amina). When Mahabba was asked to estimate how often she visited the mosque and she said: 'It depends where I am and how I am, I cannot do the same practice, like praying five times a day at the same place, it depends where I am at that time' (Mahabba). Amina's and Aisha's decisions concerning this issue were made very much on the same grounds (Aisha; Amina). In her free time Aisha went to the mosque more often, but while being busy in the faculty she rarely had time to visit it (Aisha). Qadr, who worked eight hours per day, thought that she did not have time 'to go for half an hour or one hour to the mosque and [...] come back' (Qadr).

Albanian women have been given greater possibilities to receive an Islamic education in recent years, as there has been a growing demand for it. In addition to Isa Beg medrese, located in the suburbs of Skopje in Kondovo, new medrese has been opened for female students only in Tetovo. Also in Gostivar and Skopje the medreses had female sections. During my time in the field, in Tetovo the number of students was said to be about 150 and in Gostivar they were about 25. Since 1997 the Islamic Faculty, located in the Isa Beg medrese's neighbourhood, has also been open to female students (Field diary; cf. Iseni 2007a, 27). Whether this Islamic religious education given in medreses was a state-supported activity was unclear to Amina. However she knew that the medrese had existed for a very long time. (Amina) One of the reference persons stated through an interpreter, regarding the students of the Islamic Faculty, that: 'The faculty of Islamic science, which is approved for mans and for womans together [...] I can say in faculty for sure the number of the womans is higher than the number of the mans' (Interview 12). Thus, even this Islamic space was transforming and the women were becoming a more important part of it.

Islamic education was often organized in medreses, but also in contact with the mosques (e.g. Sabah) often based on voluntary work (Zainab) and when speaking about it the women predominantly used the terms 'mekteb' and 'dars'. Hawwa wished that Islamic education would be implemented in the teaching that was organized in the schools (Hawwa). Zainab said that in addition to what the medreses and the Islamic faculty offered, religious education had been implemented in the public schools in 2008 and it consisted of two hours of teaching every week starting from the fifth grade (e.g. Zainab; Habiba; Hawwa; Qadr). This religious education had been organized for each religious group separately (Zainab). Religious education in the schools was implemented in 2008–2009 in the teaching starting in the sixth grade and it consisted of education either in one particular religion or more



general knowledge of religion (Laitila 2011, 79). However, religious education was discontinued in 2009 because it was considered unconstitutional (Laitila 2011, 79; Le Courrier des Balkans 2009a).

Islamic education for children was however still available at the mosques (e.g. Nawal). Zainab stated that this voluntary education made possible the learning of the most central things related to Islam:

*Zainab: In Macedonia and aa we have too every, every day voluntary woman in a moscow [meaning a mosque].*

*Interpreter: Aa like aa school, weekend school for children.*

*Zainab: Yes, after school.*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Interpreter: In the mosques.*

*Zainab: In the mosques they learn about the most important things for our religion.*

*(Zainab, 25 years old, city dweller)*

Nuriya explained that families sent children to an imam at the mosque and there they had the possibility to learn how to read the Qur'an and how to practise praying. In addition they learned about the Islamic principles, norms and conditions (Nuriya; also Qadr). Nuriya considered that there were enough possibilities and teachers for the people to receive Islamic education. Even here she underlined the significance of free will and voluntariness and said that, when it came to participating in Islamic teaching 'the chance is given [...] the individ[ual] is the one to make the decision' (Nuriya; also Nawal). Thus, Islamic education was one of the arenas in the Republic of Macedonia where the Muslims, and Muslim women, negotiated for their identities and sought validation for their identity construction in the Macedonian public sphere.

In contrast to what Nuriya said above, Aida did not see the prevailing circumstances regarding religious education as particularly bright in 2009:

*Aida: We don't have one [religious education] here.*

*NR: [Smiles].*

*Aida: I mean according to the law, we don't have in schools.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: Public schools, but there are ough, I don't know, private, not schools but, private the mm classes when you can, where you can attend, take to to [...] at this religious education and this is very individually, they are not controlled from anyone.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: Like if today I would like to teach something, I just tell it, I teach religious, mm, the Muslim religion, like people come to me and [...] they pay [for the lesson] and that's it.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Aida: So this is something which is not good.*

*NR: Yeah?*

*Aida: Everybody gets different education.*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Aida's criticism is probably accurately directed as the lack of control of religious education could lead to a diversity of interpretations among which some might be unconventional or even harmful. Also Amala shared the view that religious education was not that well organized (Amala). Mahabba made the point that religion was not taught in the schools and Aisha expressed dissatisfaction by stating that even though 'the whole world' had religious classes in primary and secondary schools, this was not implemented in the Republic of Macedonia (Mahabba; Aisha). This was according to Aisha due to the ideas the politicians had that such things as the behaviour of the pupils could change because of religious education. (Aisha) Nawal required that the person from whom she would receive religious education would be highly educated, not someone who did not really know about the topics s/he covered (Nawal). Amala wanted children to have more opportunities to access religious education and literature, which would be more modern and up-to-date than what was currently offered for instance on TV (Amala).

Among the women who participated in my study, ten had received a religious education of some kind, two from their parents or other family members, six in addition at the mosque, for example through participation in mekteb (Islamic elementary education) or dars (lesson or lecture). Amina said that when she was younger, she had gone to mekteb to learn the Qur'an five times a week from Monday to Friday. Nowadays she attended the lessons given by an imam. Sometimes she went also to a mosque to listen to the teachings. (Amina) Two of the women had received religious teaching from a Bektashi baba and

one of these women had also participated in teaching at the mosque (Khadija; Wafa). One woman stated that she had individually studied Islam (Hanifa). Some women also reckoned that they had knowledge about other religions in addition to Islam (e.g. Habiba; Nawal; Zahra). All of the women said they read religious literature at least occasionally. However, Nawal mentioned that she had not done this during the last few years (Nawal). Many, particularly the younger, women seemed very eager to learn more and dedicated some of their time to reading religious publications. That is, Islam seemed to be an inherent part of the women's identity construction and they often aimed at developing their knowledge regarding it.

The Qur'an held a central position in the religious literature read by the women (e.g. Amina; Aida). As for the religiously important or central texts, thirteen of the women had read at least parts of the Qur'an and four of them mentioned also reading hadiths. Zainab said that she enjoyed reading hadiths and did so almost daily (Zainab). Other works that were brought up were often related to the themes such as the life of the Prophet Muhammad, woman in Islam and introductions or explanations to the Quranic texts. One of the favourite books was Aid El-Karni's *Mos u trishto* (2006, Do Not Be Sad – e.g. Zainab). El-Karni (born in 1960) is an Islamic scholar from Saudi Arabia and this work of his is popular in the whole Muslim world. In Bektashi literature the importance of Baba Rexhepi's (1901–1995), who was an important spiritual master, work *Misticizma Islame dhe Bektashizma* (2006 [1970], Islamic Mysticism and Bektashism) (Khadija) and the Bible (Wafa) were mentioned. Wafa, who was from a Sunni family and had married a Bektashi man, told that she had studied the whole Qur'an at the mosque and was familiar with the Bible to some extent as well (Wafa). Habiba said that she had read the Qur'an twice and that in addition she had learned things about Christianity. However, she put more emphasis on learning more about her own religion, Islam (Habiba). Aida, as well as some others, also read literature that was related to other religious traditions. In addition to the Qur'an, Aida had read an introduction to the Qur'an that guided the reader to the art of reading the Quranic texts and knowing the connections between its different parts (Aida).

Nuriya wished that people in general would read more (Nuriya). Khadija told that she was learning about things related to religion in addition to reading, also directly from a Bektashi baba (Khadija). Fatima stated that religious education was something each family and every individual were responsible for themselves. It was not

organized by the muftinia and participating in it was voluntary. Some organizations or groups of people arranged Islamic education. To receive this education one was often taught by an imam or participated in classes. (Fatima) In addition to the Islamic education, Islamic bookshops also contributed in bringing the religious into the public sphere and offered both literature and religiously linked accessories of different kinds to the women.

It seemed that some changes regarding the transmission of the religious tradition had relatively recently occurred in the Republic of Macedonia. Khadija described the situation within the Bektashi tradition accordingly:

*Khadija [through an interpreter]: Now when Baba Mondi came here...*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Khadija: Now we can learn some more and we know much.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Khadija: Before we use to, we use to understand the religion from people like now my grand, my father-in-law was talking [this person was with us before the interview] [...] now we are reading more.*

*(Khadija, 53 years old, village dweller)*

What was previously transmitted orally by people had taken more literary forms and direct access to religious texts and teachings had been facilitated. The public return of and the knowledge spread by the Islamic leaders also played a significant part in this development according to Khadija. Hanifa further stated that communism had limited access to religious knowledge and practice, but nowadays people wanted to learn and know more (Hanifa). This opinion was shared by Habiba, who said that the situation had improved due to the new laws, which had increased freedom of religion and which were decreed during the period of transition. Nowadays people had 'the right to believe' (Habiba). They could also read as much as they wanted in order to improve their knowledge of religion. Habiba was satisfied with the current circumstances and said that she could try to read more as much as she herself needed. (Habiba)

### **Albanian Woman in Transition**

The status of Albanian women was a topic that gave rise to a lot of discussion with most of the people I met in my fieldwork. However, the majority of my informants were satisfied with the position they had in their community (e.g. Habiba; Zainab), or even very satis-

fied (e.g. Amala), or considered the position to be at the highest level (Sabah). At the societal level Amala said that she had a good position, which was not influenced by her religious affiliation (Amala). Aisha viewed the quality of life of an Albanian woman in the society as good, but thought, contrary to Amala, that her religious belonging influenced her position within the societal framework. She did not want to elaborate why exactly she thought this to be the case. Within the Albanian community she saw her position as satisfying. (Aisha) The status of Albanian woman in Macedonian society was considered to be good (e.g. Amina), very good (e.g. Hawwa), or even perfect (e.g. Sabah). Thus, these women indicated out their good, or satisfying position within Albanian community and Macedonian society, but they also expressed that their religious belonging might be an issue, which influenced their lives at the societal level.

Of the women Khadija said that she was satisfied with her status both at home and outside of it (Khadija), in both the private and in public spheres. Qadr, similar to Habiba, Sabah and Zainab, was very satisfied and happy with the position she had in her own community. As a Muslim, like Zainab, Qadr did not consider herself to have gained any particular opportunities within her community. (Qadr; Zainab) Amina perceived her position within her own community as 'super' (Amina). Like Qadr, Aida did not see either that Islam would bestow upon her any particular kinds of opportunities, but that it fulfilled her from within (Aida). Zainab thought that as a Muslim she could tell other people about her religion, but otherwise this position did not offer her any particular opportunities (Zainab). Amala told that particularly the earlier, lower level of education of Albanian women was related to political reasons in the socialist Yugoslavia and later in the Republic of Macedonia. According to her, during the fifty years of communism Albanian women's access to education was often made difficult by religious people:

*Amala [through an interpreter]: So the the influence of politic[s] was, they can punish the Albanian woman, they were saying the imams [...] were saying that it's not good to to go to school [...] that was made, so the next generation [...] of ladies not to be higher level [...] so they can manipulate with ne nation [...] easier [...] when they don't have an [...] education [...] level, then you can manipulate with them [...] easy [...] that's like many many politic[al] reasons [...] why, I don't [know] why but...*

*(Amala, 35 years old, village dweller)*

Krasniqi's view of the situation could help to explain Amala's statement. He claimed that Albanians in the SFRY were exposed on the part of the authorities to the use of religion against the Albanian national cause. This aimed at strengthening religious identity among the Albanians to the detriment of the ethnic one. (Krasniqi 2010, 8)

Even in the current circumstances women's general weaker level of education might be discerned in that two thirds of the illiterate people in the Republic of Macedonia were women. This may be due to the lack of primary and secondary schools in some rural areas or grounded in existing prejudices and stereotypes regarding the education of girls. Also, women's insufficient access to information which might motivate them to strive for better opportunities, education and personal growth, could decrease women's awareness regarding these issues. For these reasons women from the rural areas were often not competitive in the labour market and not active in public, social or political life. And their possibilities to improve their economic and social status remained challenging. According to Todorovska women from the rural areas, like representatives of the minority groups, were still insufficiently involved in the educational processes. There was also a gender imbalance in terms of choosing the type of education and a kind of division into 'male' and 'female' professions, even though in the education system as such a heterogeneous gender structure exists. (Todorovska 2009)

Twenty-five-year-old Zainab described the changes of Albanian women's status within the Albanian community as a relatively recent phenomenon:

NR: *How is your life as an Albanian woman in your own community?*

Zainab: *Good [smiles].*

NR: *Hm [smiles].*

Zainab: *Good, aamm aa last ten years I want to say that for thee Albanian woman, aa Albanian woman had a revolution because ten years ago it wasn't so, it it wasn't so important to go at school or to [...] work [...] but then [...] after that aa, for example for my village, for my family, most important thing is too go in school, to get graduated in something in in some aa, faculty, aa, and a woman and especially for a woman, and aa it is important to go and work too, to be somehow independent and aa ten years ago it it wasn't important, for example I have cousins [...] my cousins they didn't go at school and ev everything, because they are older, but for me it was most important thing, for my father, for my family, I don't know, it was very [...] fast [...] transformation [...]*

NR: *Hmh, is there, are there reason why, why ten years ago? What happened?*

Zainab: *I say ten years.*

NR: *Or?*

Zainab: *Be not exactly ten, it maybe can be, I don't know, ten eleven fifteen [...] maybe longer, but I want to say that it is like white and black [the difference].*

*(Zainab, 25 years old, city dweller)*

Zainab did not know the exact reasons behind this development, but supposed that it was related to the increasing integration of Albanians into Macedonian society. This had meant better work places for the Albanians and establishment of an Albanian-language university in Tetovo. After years in Albanian high schools, education organized in the mother tongue at the university could offer a convenable continuum. Zainab also thought that the years many Albanian family members had spent in the diaspora in different parts of the world might have brought about a change in the prevailing attitudes within the Albanian community. As migrants these people saw different ways of life in which the women participated actively by working. In order to be properly employed they needed to have an education. Zainab said that her mother did not have a university degree, but had made a lot of efforts to give her daughters the chance to study:

Zainab: *She [Zainab's mother] [...] foughted a lot for me, my sister, to go in faculty, especially us like a woman, aa for my brother she said, he is a boy, he can do some [...] hard work.*

NR: *Hm.*

Zainab: *Yes [...] to work [...] but to woman is very important to go to school [...] maybe it is, it's not sure, it's my opinion.*

*(Zainab, 25 years old, city dweller)*

The opinion that Islam as a religion did not limit women in the domains of study or education (cf. Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 9) was mentioned several times by the women, probably because this issue has been of importance for the Albanian community and the Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia (e.g. Hawwa). Qadr for instance raised the issue that the older generation of women had received limited access to education. Even though she did not feel involved in this herself, she still felt that living as an Albanian woman in the contemporary Macedonian society was difficult. Qadr wished that particularly this aspect of women's education would improve. Even though she was not against for instance the women's use of scarves, she thought that education had an impact on how Islam was practised: 'They are uneducated [...] so they will misunderstand all the things you know [...] I hope that this thing would change, I mean Turkey changed' (Qadr). For Qadr living as an educated Muslim woman in a relatively secular society, similar to the Turkish model, seemed to represent some kind of an ideal. Zainab considered that even though she herself did not feel affected by this, the lower level of education amongst Albanian women could be perceived everywhere in society, for example in its different institutions. Because of this Zainab also felt that Macedonian society tended to look down on Albanian women, and especially for the older women this could be a relatively difficult experience. (Zainab) Also Farah stated that Albanian women's lives and possibilities had improved: 'It's good *alhamdulillah* [thanks be to God], it's better, it's, it's getting better and better you know' (Farah).

Fifty-nine-year-old Zahra was convinced that women in general should not have to put up with everything within the family. Through her personal experiences she perceived that difficult decisions she had made in life regarding, for instance, the relationship between husband and wife were related to her upbringing and not to religion as such. She thought that in contemporary society most Albanian women were very free, 'lots of them they have educated themselves, we still have some aa old fashioned but, who don't send the kids to school, the Albanian woman has very big role today in our society, they have their own voice' (Zahra). Previously it had not been like this and the women had been 'without voice' as Zahra put it. Nowadays, however, Zahra thought that Muslim women could be active, take care of themselves without being dependent on the man, raise their children and 'to be whatever they wanted to be' (Zahra)

Most of the women interviewed said that for them personally the situation was good. Habiba thought that the Albanian woman was being



respected as an intellectual and educated person and a believer in society (Habiba). Nuriya said that she was in general satisfied with her life, but that things could always, of course, be better (Nuriya). Nawal was of the opinion that her life as an Albanian woman in her community was good, but she did not consider that her 'Muslimness' brought her any particular opportunities within it. At the level of society she thought that being an Albanian woman was 'not bad' and it depended on how other people accepted and received you. Nawal considered herself to be privileged as she knew the Macedonian language very well and was educated. Furthermore, she had mastered some other languages and described herself as an open character, qualities which helped her in making friends everywhere. (Nawal)

The position and status the Albanian women had in the society and in the Albanian community was an issue that often led to fervent discussions, both for and against its actual character. This position was considered to be not bad (e.g. Nawal) or good by some of the interviewees (e.g. Amina) or better than before (e.g. Farah). According to eight informants women looked after their own interests in socially related questions, in the first instance themselves (e.g. Nuriya; Aisha; Amala). If the woman would not do this herself, her husband would take over, whereafter her family would take on this responsibility (e.g. Amina). Nuriya said that the women in the first place carry responsibility for themselves. She continued by stating that in the case the woman was not married her family would be responsible for her interests. Once married or employed she could be responsible for her own interests, payments and such. (Nuriya) These answers would indicate that decisions regarding diverse socially relevant questions were not automatically being made for the women by members of the family or others, claims I often heard in my fieldwork.

Fatima saw that the woman herself was primarily responsible for her own interests and considered that if Muslim women were not able to attend to this themselves, they should be helped by their Islamic brothers, men. Furthermore, Fatima thought that there should be interests in developing the possibilities of the women further, particularly in the village community where she lived. In her view, women should have more self-esteem and be interested in their rights, find solidarity and unity within their group and receive support and protection from the Macedonian state for this purpose. (Fatima) The state (Khadija; Zainab) and organizations that the women did not define in detail (Nawal; Zainab) were seen as possible carriers of responsibility in these cases. Eleven of the women considered that this responsibility

belonged to the husband and nine thought it rested with families or parents, meaning however predominantly cases in which the woman herself was for some reason unable to defend her own rights and interests.

Hanifa stated that women's interests in these social questions lay on the shoulders of their husbands, sons, fathers or brothers. She also considered that these issues did not need any particular further examination. (Hanifa) Among the women, her view was particularly strict, in line with a stricter Islamic perception on this matter. However, more generally among the women there was an expressed wish for more attention to be directed on women's interests in the society (e.g. Amina; Hawwa; Khadija; Qadr; Wafa; Aida; Mahabba; Zainab). Hawwa said that women should be active in these questions themselves: 'If you don't care for your interest for yourself nobody will' (Hawwa). By this she meant that women should not depend on their families or husbands in these questions, but could receive help from them. If a woman was married, she would be supported by her husband in these questions, and if she was single the parents would take care of them. (Hawwa) Aisha considered that even though she was not personally concerned, there should be changes within society. One should even fight for these changes if necessary, in order to give the women the position that they should have. Similar to Qadr and others, Aisha shared the view that women in general looked after their own interests. (Aisha) Zainab wanted to participate in societal work for women, as she found it very necessary. Unfortunately for now she did not have the opportunity and time to do this. (Zainab)

Habiba thought that the family took care of a woman's interests in social issues. If she was married this was her husband's responsibility. (Habiba) Sabah considered also that the husband was accountable for a woman in social issues and that: 'We [husband and wife] should do everything together equally' (Sabah). Zahra stated that 'the man should look, the husband should look [after women's interests] [...] but today, like I said, the woman are able to look for themselves too' (Zahra). Zahra did not consider that this question would actually need any further discussion. (Zahra) Nawal did not see that religion played a role in her own positioning within society, or that being a Muslim would offer her any special opportunities. However, she considered it necessary to attend to and promote women's interests, as men had more rights than women in some contexts. She also said that sometimes her husband asked her to do something at home and she would respond to him: 'Why?' Nawal thought that it made no difference if

you were a man or a woman when it came to taking care of different tasks at home and working generally. (Nawal) When I asked her whether she thought that this kind of behaviour – different tasks for men and women, would be motivated by religion she answered:

*Nawal: Well I can't, I can't give you an answer on this because I don't know what others are thinking about this you know.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Nawal: I've been born and grown in a family where we were very advanced family [...] you know and aa we were for example my father was trying to help my mother [...] my mother has always worked.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Nawal: Well I can't say that it is the same for everyone you know [...] for every family, it depends from the education of the family.*

*(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)*

Nawal described her family as a very 'advanced' one. By this she meant that her mother had always had a job and that her father had participated in various domestic tasks. Nawal hesitated in identifying her own view with those of others as she assumed that there might be differences, because of different educational backgrounds. The more traditional gender roles in the Albanian community might, according to this view, be tied to the educational background. As for the role of religion in these issues Nawal did not have an opinion about the influence it might have.

Amina for her part stated that Islam had a positive influence on social issues, firstly because it gave equal rights to men and women, and women could for instance stand for elections, cast their votes and work. Amina also thought that a woman had the right to take care of herself regarding social issues, whereafter she mentioned first the care of the husband and then that of the parents. (Amina) Aida did not see that Islam would have any influence on the position she had in society. As for women's interests, she thought that the husband and the parents were responsible for taking care of these. (Aida) Regarding the general situation of women in the Republic of Macedonia, Aida was displeased:

*Aida: Here somebody needs to do something for the women [...] most of the families are, the womens are not [...] are not respected at all, they don't even attend to school, they don't get education [...] they only stay at home, raise childrens and for me personally not, but eighty percent of the women, not eighty, okay sixty percent, of the women are like that.*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Aida: All sit home, you haven't seen their face even [smiles].*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Aida had a strong opinion regarding this issue, while she did not feel that she belonged to or identified with this group of women who had limited rights and possibilities herself. Here also the issue of education was being emphasized. Aida saw women's lives as being limited to within the walls of the household and thus to the private sphere where their only task was to raise children. This picture corresponds well with the general current opinions the Macedonian (Slavic) population could have regarding the Albanian community, often viewed from a distance. Aida was the only woman among the interviewees to give an emphatic voice to this issue. This might be due to her dissatisfaction with the general situation, her better knowledge of the issue and its comprehensiveness, or because she identified more with another social group and wished to draw a more important line of distinction and distance herself, from the situation.

Instead of education Mahabba reflected more on the economic aspects of the situation of women. She considered that once employed, a woman could take care of herself. While she was a student her parents usually took care of her interests. According to Mahabba, if a woman was married and employed, she could look after herself. However if she had children and wanted to educate them, the responsibility for this lay on the shoulders of the husband (Mahabba). Mahabba mentioned that some aspects related to women's interests were not implemented according to Islam in the Republic of Macedonia:

*Mahabba [through an interpreter]: No, she [Mahabba] wouldn't say that it functions like it should be...*

*NR: It, it functions?*

*Mahabba: Like as an example she [Mahabba] takes if [...] the family inherits something and [...] that part of family fortune...is it like that?*

*NR: Yes, fortune.*

*Mahabba: It goes the biggest part, the entire part, goes at the male.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Mahabba: And in Islam it's not like that, [it's] divided so it goes a part of it for the female too.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Mahabba: So it's not, it's not...*

*NR: Implemented?*

*Mahabba: Yes, it's not implemented.*

*(Mahabba, 24 years old, village dweller)*

Mahabba spoke of her perception of an anomaly regarding the division of an inheritance and considered that adopting the Islamic way of functioning in this respect could improve the situation in which the women currently found themselves. This would mean that a share would be given also to the women, instead of handing the inheritance over only to the male family members, a habit that was most likely related to Kanun legislation. Thus, the application of Islamic principles could enlarge women's sphere of influence and accord them more rights.

In this subsection the Albanian women interviewed reflected on their status and opportunities within the Albanian community and Macedonian society. The opinions they had bore witness, again, to a variety of views. Albanian woman was perceived as not having access to her full rights and even having a limited social space, but also as already enjoying better conditions than before and having opportunities to lead her own life and make her own decisions. Economic and educational questions seemed to carry a particular weight when it came to women's chances to make significant decisions regarding their own lives, as these were linked to their access to a more independence and acknowledgment. Also a Muslim identity could be an aspect that potentially gave the women an entry to more significant rights, for instance in relation to education and inheritance. The prevailing opinion seemed to be that the women interviewed were relatively satisfied

with their positions, even though improvements regarding the general situation of the women were desirable. There seemed to be differences between the generations when it came to the questions of how an Albanian woman was positioned in Macedonian society and what kinds of opportunities she had access to. These matters were explained by political reasons, improved integration of Albanians into the Macedonian society, as well as the impact of diasporic life experiences, or other effects arising during the period of transition. What the women said about the situation and how it had developed lately, spoke for identities of the Albanian women, which acknowledged more, had striven or were striving for more independence, and were more and more educated. Even though social contexts remained important in the women's narratives, there was a clearly expressed statement of the women's own responsibility as regards their status and opportunities in the Republic of Macedonia.

### **Islam in Macedonian Media Channels and Holiday Scheduling**

It seemed that until now Islam has been accorded relatively limited space in the Macedonian media (e.g. Nuriya; Fatima; Nawal; Qadr; Amina; Zainab). However, the women mentioned that some Islamic events, such as the Bajram celebrations, or Islamic holidays, as well as a speech or a prayer given by the reis-ul-ulema, the head of the Islamic Religious Community were often given a greater or lesser degree of coverage on television (e.g. Nawal; Qadr; Amina). Aisha said that topical Islamic events were covered in the media: 'When there is issues like [...] Hajj or Bajram or Ramadan, they call an imam and make a programme or something like that' (Aisha). She considered this to be a positive thing, as people could thereby increase their knowledge of Islam and it could help them in resolving problematic questions in their everyday lives (Aisha). The relatively rarely mediatized issues regarding religion were seen as having part in how religion was perceived in society. As Farah said 'it [media] certainly has [an impact], but it's not that our media does something for religion' (Farah). Qadr, however, did not see that the media had an impact on the perception of religion within society. She nonetheless thought that the programmes transmitted in the Albanian language allocated more space for religion nowadays. (Qadr) Nuriya said that religion appeared in the media maybe once a year, when it was time for the Bajram prayer. In addition to the prayer it could be mentioned where the prayers had been officiated. Also a radio programme covering religious issues was

broadcast every Friday. Nuriya thought this could be significant for the women who stayed at home:

*Nuriya [through an interpreter]: As for the the females that are like housewives, housekeepers at home, she thinks that that's a kind of influence [if religion is discussed in media] on them.*

*NR: I I would like to know more about the the thing, like how? If she can say something about that*

*Nuriya: She [Nuriya] says like there are some like such a classes, not a classes like dars it is called*

*NR: Darsii, darsii?*

*Nuriya: Yeah darsii.*

*NR: Yeah it is a Arabic word, means a lecture or something.*

*Nuriya: Lectures, lectures on on radio every Friday.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Nuriya: So they listen to them [...] with the cable on the cable TV other programs, have such programmes like with nasheeds [ilahiyas] and lectures and so on.*

*NR: I was watching one day like Hayat [the name of the TV channel] ...?*

*Nuriya: Yeah Hayat, it is Bosnian.*

*NR: It is Bosnian one okay, because they were, they were...*

*Nuriya: They are not like our mediums, they are from different countries, like from Albania from Arabic*

*NR: But do you have local [programmes] like, there is...*

*Nuriya: Only on the radio.*

*(Nuriya, 22 years old, village dweller)*

Farah described the contents of these Friday lectures, which lasted around 1.5–2 hours, as consisting of around one hour of nasheeds (known also as *ilahiyas*, religious hymns) and the other half consisted of an imam's teaching and preaching (Farah). Khadija stated that from the Bektashi point of view the variety of religious programmes was not satisfactory and that there never were programmes that would be directed to the Bektashis (Khadija). These excerpts show how the women positioned their religious identities in relation to what they saw in the Macedonian media. These positionings were related to the amount of time devoted and the visibility of religion/Islam on different channels of the media, as well as to the access the different Islamic groups had to them. It was claimed that the Albanian programmes were becoming more oriented towards religion. The Albanian women also seemed in general to perceive the visibility of Islam in the media as something positive.

Many women thought that Islamic Religious Community was rarely visible in the media and that the community's participation in social and societal issues was considered as not very significant in terms of scale. Some women even expressed hesitancy about the impact of the Islamic Religious Community's governance over the country's religious life. In magazines and newspapers Islam gained little attention or space. As for the religious Islamic magazines, Zainab stated that there were some available in Albanian, but that it was difficult to publish something like that on a monthly basis, for example, as it required a lot of work and financing. Thus, these publications were often based on voluntary work and could not be considered as particularly 'professional' newspapers, Zainab thought (Zainab; cf. Farkas 2007, 28). However, the Islamic Religious Community published a monthly magazine *Hëna e Re* (New Moon) and the Bektashi Religious Community a magazine called *Urtësia* (Wisdom). The Islamic Religious Community also had an elaborate website.<sup>95</sup> And some informative websites<sup>96</sup> concerning the Bektashi Community could also be found online. The chance to participate in the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca, hajj, was advertised on the local TV channels. In 2009, the Islamic Religious Community had made a decision to advertise the hajj on the local media channels, which were more affordable and broadcasted the advertisement more often. This was more likely to again a wider audience. The number of pilgrims had been increasing in the Republic of Macedonia and in 2009 it was estimated to be around 2,000 persons. (Field diary) Thus, information regarding Islam, even though often modest in quantity, was available in Albanian on all Macedonian media channels and the Islamic communities contributed to this situation. There was however also some pronounced criticism as to the quality of the local Islamic publications.

Of the women Hawwa was of the opinion that the media had a significant role and that it could be used to break stereotypical perceptions and prejudices that existed between the different religions (Hawwa). Nawal, for her part, thought that media did not have an influence on how religion was perceived in the Republic of Macedonia. She considered, however, that more space was currently given to Christian programmes on the TV. According to her, Muslims were attempting to operate through some private channels. Nawal said furthermore that one of these TV channels was located in Tetovo and broadcasted

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<sup>95</sup> [Http://www.bim.org.mk/](http://www.bim.org.mk/) (accessed 29th September 2011).

<sup>96</sup> For example <http://bektashiorde.com/> and <http://www.komunitetibektashi.org/> (accessed 29th September 2011).



an Islamic programme once a week. (Nawal) Aida thought that even though there were no local religious media channels, people could have access to others for example through cable TV. She said that in Turkey issues related to Islam had been very much discussed lately and that this discussion had affected also the situation in the Republic of Macedonia. By this she meant that developments in the Islamic field not only involved the internal situation of the country, but were also influenced from outside. Aida thought that the things that happened outside had an influence on the stricter Islamic groups and that even 'sometimes some of them, they really go there too, to help for war etcetera, as I have heard [...] it's nothing that I am a witness of' (Aida). Aida took these developments as bad publicity for the Muslims and Islam. (Aida) Zainab did not like the way some TV shows portrayed Islam and said that these potentially gave a distorted image of the Muslim woman. This worried Zainab as these shows were popular among the Macedonian population and she thought that they could influence their opinions. She particularly emphasized the impact one programme had and said that it was more accurately described as a portrayal of the traditions in one North African country than of Islam in general. (Zainab)

In other words, Zainab thought that media had an impact on how people other than Muslims, understood Islam. Hawwa was of the opinion that media should be used to erase the prevailing stereotypes between religious groups and according to Nawal Christians got more airtime on the TV. Aida saw that the media channels imported external Islamic influences to the Republic of Macedonia. All of these excerpts described how the women defined their identities as Muslims in relation to different things; in relation to a programme on TV which showed Islam in another cultural context, in relation to other religious groups and in relation to what kinds of Islamic influences were coming into the Republic of Macedonia. In Zainab's statement regarding the TV programme which gave the wrong kind of information about Islam, there was even a voicing of her fear of being misunderstood as a Muslim woman by the Macedonian population. The media could therefore, from the women's point of view, both erase and strengthen the ideas of the nature of a Muslim identity which people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, acquired.

Islamic celebrations were strongly present in the lives of the Albanian women interviewed, as all of them celebrated these. Nowadays, the religious celebrations of different traditions were also better taken into account when it came to the scheduling of holidays within Macedo-

nian working life. The holiday calendar had been re-organized in such a manner that some religious celebrations, for example the Islamic Ramazan Bajram, were public holidays. Other religious celebrations, such as Kurban Bajram, were holidays only for the members of the religious community concerned. (Field diary) As a practical example Aida pointed out that even though the law did not mention it, in everyday life she at least had always received permission from her boss or the administration in her work place to celebrate the religious holidays (Aida). Hence, holiday scheduling and Macedonian media channels were also arenas where the public space given to the Muslim identities of the women were discussed and enacted, as the women celebrated religious holidays or took a position in relation to what they saw in the media and what kind of an impact these issues might have on their lives as Muslims and women. Access and opportunities to use the media for their purposes was also potentially affecting the Muslim community as a whole, as well as its common Muslim identity.

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, which has dealt with the societal level of analysis, I firstly discussed questions related to the more general trends playing a role in the Islamic religious life in the Republic of Macedonia, such as antagonisms between societal and religious groups, the phenomena of Albanization and re-Islamization, as well as aspects of Albanian nationalism and cultural traditions in relation to Islam. Secondly, I elaborated on the status of human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of religion in the Republic of Macedonia and how the informants viewed them *vis-à-vis* Islam. Thereafter I observed the distance and connection between politics and Islam in Macedonian society as well as Islamic and ethnic experiences of otherness, as they surfaced in the interviews. Thirdly, I examined the visibility of Albanian women's religiosities and Islam in the Macedonian public sphere. This included aspects of the Albanian women's presence in the public Islamic spheres for religious practice and education, transformations in the role of Albanian women in the recent years, as well as Islam's visibility in the Macedonian media and holiday calendar. These societal developments and transitions reflected upon the identity construction of the women and how they perceived themselves as Albanians, women and Muslims. The roles such factors played in the processes of identity construction were manifest in how the women described these developments, how

they engaged with or distanced themselves from them, or what kinds of opinions they held regarding them.

The Republic of Macedonia is a multiethnic, post-conflict society, where many issues still remain challenging. There is a lack of cooperation between different actors, a lack of political dialogue, a lack of consensus in decision-making and in societal development. Furthermore, the interests of different ethnic groups make their mark on the politics; social security system is weak, and there are also ecological and economic challenges. (Lehti 2009) The disappearance of the Yugoslavian socialist regime led to a transitional state of religious, ethnic or national identities in the region. This transition has been influenced by the precarious economic situation and has led to disjointed developments amongst the different ethnic groups. It has also made possible the political mobilization of the Balkan Muslims, often inspired by ethnic and religious goals (cf. Popovic 1998) and transformed them from non-sovereign religious minorities to autonomous political actors (Bougarel 2005, 26). This has entailed not only re-compositions of the relationships between Islam and different national identities, but also between religious and political actors (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 41). In the Republic of Macedonia the Albanian women often saw religion and politics as separate entities, but they could also perceive some points of connection as well as attempts to gain ground by using religion in political speech. In addition, political problems could be seen to be reflected in religious issues. For some of the women Islam was connected to politics or to a particular group of Muslims. The women also had a range of views on how the current situation could be improved: some felt that religion and politics should be separate, while others saw that the Islamic morality could potentially heal society.

Bougarel argues that the transformation of the Muslim populations into political actors has created political parties 'that represent these populations and voice their national claims, and led to a growing "nationalization" of Islam and Islamic religious institutions' (Bougarel 2005, 26). In the Republic of Macedonia, Albanian strivings for a nationalization of Islam may be a symptom of the previously important role of the Slavic Muslims within the administration of the Islamic community, even though they represented a minority among the Muslims (cf. Krasniqi 2010, 25–26). Clayer suggests also that the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia occasionally use Islam to gain the support of other Muslim groups, and that a number of political strategies are shaped within different Muslim groups. A multidimen-

sional play of instrumentalization and cooperation within the whole society is sketched between the political parties, religious authorities (sometimes seen as mediators *vis-à-vis* the people) involving as well the external, foreign actors, both religious and politico-religious. (Clayer 2001, 240)

When observing the general situation within Macedonian society the women and people I met in the field pointed out several problems, including the unsatisfactory conditions as to the implementation of human rights, clientelism in the administrative and governmental structures, and possibly also within the Islamic Religious Community. Furthermore, they addressed issues such as corruption, the pursuit of self-interest and the irresponsibility of politicians, different ways in which pressure is applied to gain votes, the use of religion to attain political benefits and challenges related to employment and prices. However, there had also been changes for the better for instance in religious matters. Religious education had been experimented with in the schools, mosques in increasing numbers were being built and the Islamic Religious Community enjoyed the trust of some as an organizer of religious life. Furthermore, Muslim women had gained the right to appear veiled in ID photos, Islamic celebrations were taken notice of in the national holiday scheduling, Islamic education had increased, the quantity of Islamic publications had gone up and there was a constitutional freedom of religion.

In addition, the attitudes concerning Albanian women's access to education, as well as their opportunities to obtain work and speak out, had improved. These aspects were closely related to questions of their independent agency. However, the demanding economic situation in the country could impose limits on all citizens in this respect; sticking together could be a crucial factor in survival, meaning that total independence of an individual from the family could therefore be difficult to obtain. Thus, the often precarious and uncertain societal circumstances could help to create identities which were inclined towards one's own group and/or family, as the society could not offer enough support for a common civic identity (cf. Ristić 2007, 156–157; Simić 1999, 15–16). Identities in the Republic of Macedonia have tended to become more compartmentalized than unified, as each of the societal groups seemed to be obliged to fight for their own rights and, partly due to this, maintained active and beneficial social networks. If one

group managed to enhance its societal status, it did not automatically mean that other groups experienced a similar improvement.

In the interviews, Islam could function as a source of experiences of otherness. In relation to Albanian identity the Muslim identity seemed to add emphasis on the difference between particularly the biggest ethnic groups in the country, while the Albanian cultural tradition was often given a more important role than religion (cf. Lewins 1978, 20). The fall of communism/socialism in the Balkans has also meant that religious identities have been reaffirmed in the public sphere and have in some contexts become the public elements of a national identity (Clayer 2007, 721). According to the narratives of the Albanian women, Muslims in general and they themselves as Muslim women, negotiated their identities in the public sphere. This took expression in women's increased visibility in the public spaces for religious practice, in the more high profile of Islam in the public sphere, in the form of religious buildings as well as in an increased attendance to religious services. The women also mentioned increased access to religious education for Muslim women, general availability of Islamic literature and publications, as well as other activities. Finally, in addition to religious programmes and magazines, the taking into account of the most important Islamic holidays in the Macedonian media, holiday scheduling and working life were also part of Islam's increased visibility in the public sphere.

It could also be asked whether, and to what extent, the religious identities of the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia are historical remains. The increasing emphasis on the religious and Muslim identity traits among the Albanians may be partly explained, as Krasniqi (2010) suggests, as a reaction against the increasing religiosity within other societal groups, and particularly the Macedonian one. This manifests itself in the more accentuated political role of religion and the increased importance attached to religiosity in general. However, what the Albanian women mentioned regarding the contemporary religiosity of the Macedonians was relatively contradictory in my material. The Macedonians were considered to be both more inclined towards atheist values and visibly religious. Among the Albanians, the women thought that interest in Islam was clearly increasing, however, some did not share this view. The views regarding 'others' could be influenced by scarcity of contact between the groups. In such cases opinions and values could be more based on general opinions and stereotypes that are held by the different groupings in the Republic of Macedonia.

The Albanian women interviewed said that they as Muslims had faced challenges, or hesitated in using Islamic clothing, entering the mosques, practising Islam publicly, having access to mosques and tekkes within comfortable distances, having access to the premises of their religious group and also, to some extent, to Islamic education. As Albanians, the women seemed relatively satisfied with their lives within their own community. However, they mentioned that there had been relatively recent changes in the Albanian attitudes towards the Albanian women's access to education and that for some women their lower level of education might still be an issue. The women also perceived a difference between Islam and the Albanian cultural tradition when, for instance they were not satisfied with the way in which inheritance issues were administered. The system did not make provision for the women and it was felt that an Islamic way of functioning would have been more beneficial for them. How much prevailing custom of dealing with inheritance issues was linked to the Kanun was not discussed in the interviews and the women in general did not mention the Kanun's role, even though it is sometimes claimed to have remained important. Islam could be seen as an ideal from a woman's perspective; an ideal that remained unaccomplished in reality, but which could facilitate women's access to education and inheritance, as well as in general to fuller rights. The Albanian women's identity negotiations therefore took place on two levels: within the Albanian community, but also in relation to Macedonian society. Having a Muslim identity could help, but also limit, access to social/public space and women's rights, depending on the context.

As elaborated previously, a person's identity is defined by several components, including the self-definition one has of oneself, but also one's relation to others, otherness and how one is perceived by others (cf. Roald 2001, 17). In the Republic of Macedonia many-sided otherness was omnipresent and enacted in various ways in everyday life, when different cultural features encountered each other and interacted. These myriad encounters could support processes of identity construction, as they implied encountering the other. In Macedonian society one could continuously perceive and face the particularities and uniqueness of different groups and identities, but, of course, also find uniting and shared features (cf. Duijzings 2000, 13). I would claim that people in the Republic of Macedonia were in general much more

connected to the particular characteristics of their own group than what, for example, Thiessen (2010) proposes. Thus, national, ethnic and religious identities would, according to my estimation, be of a more enduring nature in a context where the line between self and the other was constantly being redrawn (cf. Liebkind 2010, 19). If a society went through relatively fast changes, it did not necessarily mean that people's attitudes would change at the same pace. In the context I encountered, identities were fortified by the presence of 'others', by injustices which had been experienced within different groups in relation to legislation, by historical interpretations and stereotypes, by distrust of political structures and their instability and, in the case of Albanians, also by the fact of being in a minority position in Macedonian society (cf. Lewins 1978, 22).

Issues related to religion and language often affected the individual, even though the debate concerning them would take place at a societal or even global level, as religion and language are often very personal and even emotionally-tied manifestations of identity. Questions related to civic identity, national identity and citizenship in relation to each individual's religious and linguistic identities permeate the three-level analytical model, as they are simultaneously both collectively shared and very private. In Macedonian society the majority population faced a situation where its language, religion, nationhood and statehood were being questioned in different ways by the neighbouring countries.<sup>97</sup> Macedonians also have a history as a minority nation within the former socialist Yugoslavia and in the course of history they have been subject to several attempts of assimilation. To a certain extent the Macedonian state is established as an antithesis to the socialist Yugoslavia, even though it was within socialist Yugoslavia that the Macedonians were given their rights as a nation and despite some socialist sympathies which continued into the post-Yugoslav era. If the dominating discourse in the socialist Yugoslavia was that of unity, nowadays it tends to have changed its course to one of difference (Cf. Thiessen 2007, 170). In the present situation, following the still ongoing process of joining the EU, the Macedonian government is modifying public spaces in order to illustrate a deliberate break with the Yugoslavian and Ottoman past and to create a different past that would connect the Republic of Macedonia directly with Central Europe (Thiessen 2010, 45). This seems to aim at proving the 'Europe-

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<sup>97</sup> I have even met an argument that the Macedonian identity would be based on denial imposed on it by the others.

anness' of the Macedonian identity and/or its roots in the Antiquity. These actions have however upset for example the Albanian NGOs and the Islamic Religious Community (Krasniqi 2010, 28).

From this position of 'being denied', it may be difficult for the Macedonian state, as a certain kind of 'protector' of Macedonianity, and for the Macedonians, to give adequate space and attention to questions related to minority rights within the state borders. This issue was also one of the elements triggering the conflict in 2000–2001. The re-surfacing ethnic tensions within the Macedonian society have also played a role in the EU accession talks: even though they have not been the only issue slowing down the EU membership process (cf. Tuhina 2010). From the Macedonian perspective it seems that the disappearance of the Berlin Wall has erected another one; 'one that was demarcated by the European border construction project' (Thiessen 2010, 48). In this framework the post-socialist countries may be viewed as the still 'wild' East often in need of being rescued by Europe. This antagonism has influenced the attitudes of the Macedonian citizens and the government has also showed signs of willingness to oppose Europe and to more emphatically promote the historical roots of the Macedonian culture and past. However, in the identity negotiations the choices between 'West' and 'Balkan', 'them' and 'us' are not sole (cf. Thiessen 2010, 48 and 56).

The unfortunate tension between the Macedonian and the Albanian groups is one of the most important elements that define the context within which ethnic identities are positioned and delineated. Brunnbauer considers that one precondition for the development of stronger civic identities, and also a stronger civil society in the Republic of Macedonia, is the generation of appropriate security, which would guarantee that cultural identities are no longer threatened. Brunnbauer refers mainly to the Macedonian population, but I would claim that this concerns at least both of the two biggest ethnic groups in the country; the Macedonians and Albanians. Decreasing the feelings of threat could decrease the importance attached to questions related to ethnic identities and national history and thus prepare way for more inclusive modes of identification. (Cf. Brown 2000, 124 and 128; Brunnbauer 2002, 19–20) Also, better social and economic integration could provide wider and more stable identifications for different groups (Duijzings 2000, 7). A group's position in a society articulates its identity. In the Macedonian context it is important to note that the entire Macedonian population suffers from distrust towards administrative structures and societal institutions. This has an effect of



strengthening the trust in family relationships and friendships, which then supports the creation of compartmentalized communities. It can also strengthen an individual's trust in religious conviction, which might help to create order amidst societal disorder and offer moral support and ideals. Also, as Maalouf suggests, situations in which political power prevents the democratic life and development of a society may lead to a strengthening of traditional forms of belonging, and also more accentuated religious ideologies, and identities (cf. Maalouf 1998, 192).

The Albanian identity builds on a national culture that spreads over the territories of several Balkan states and is characterized by diversity at the levels of language (dialectal groups), regional customs and religion. The emphasis given to it is most likely influenced by the position in which the Albanians find themselves in each of these societal entities. In the Macedonian case it can be observed that ethnicity and the construction of ethnic identity, which play a part in the individual's primary socialisation processes, are fortified by antagonisms between different groups. These antagonisms become visible for instance in the organization of separate education programmes, organized according to language (ethnic) groups. Hence, ethnic belonging can become pervasive and more emphasized in one's identity (cf. Liebkind 2006, 79).

For the Albanian women the possible negative perceptions held by Macedonians of their societal group could be less significant in everyday life than the challenges they met as women and Muslims within their own community. Or, to the contrary, the Macedonian attitudes within the society could weigh more on them than those they faced as women and Muslims within the Albanian community. Gender identity seemed to define the women's Albanian and Muslim identities, but perhaps to a lesser extent their identity as Macedonian citizens. However, as Macedonian citizens, despite laws and attempts at establishing gender equality, women in general still struggled and in many societal fields they remained marginalized (cf. Todorovska 2009). In Macedonian society many prejudices prevail, therefore it may be that possession of Macedonian citizenship<sup>98</sup> remained less emphasized and possibly even less appreciated as a part of the identity construction of an Albanian woman. Feelings of otherness could therefore, as I illustrated by means of my material, be experienced by Albanian Muslim

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<sup>98</sup> To obtain a Macedonian citizenship has sometimes been a difficult task for those who belong to the minorities, due to the citizenship criteria; for more information see for example Poulton 2000, 182–184.

women in the Republic of Macedonia on five levels; in relation to citizenship, ethnicity, gender, language and religion.

People belonging to an ethnic minority define their identity in relation to a variety of groups (Liebkind 2006, 87). In my material positions were taken in relation to various Islamic and Muslim groups, as well as the Roma and the Macedonians. However, I would claim that in the case of the Albanian population of the Republic of Macedonia in general, the most significant other was represented by the Macedonians (cf. Clayer 2007, 721; Liebkind 2006, 87). This was most likely linked to the fact that the size of these ethnic groups had an impact on the internal power structures of Macedonian society and they formed well over 90% of the Macedonian population. These and other relevant layers of Macedonian society were reinforced by historical experiences, which often carried somewhat negative connotations. (Cf. Liebkind 2006, 80) If the Republic of Macedonia is experienced as the other by neighbouring Greece, as Rasku (2007) suggests and vice versa, and the Albanians as the intern other by the Macedonians, as Thiessen (2007) proposes, I would claim that the interviewed women defined themselves and their identities at this societal level particularly in relation to two entities of others: Macedonian society and the Albanian cultural traditions. But, thirdly also the Muslim community, both locally and globally, was an important factor in this process.

To sum up, religious and linguistic identities in the Republic of Macedonia seem to be meaningful and are continuously acknowledged in everyday contexts. In other words, they matter. The emphasis given to them and the meanings they take can, however, vary. As Nuriya put it when I asked her about her life as an Albanian in Macedonian society: 'Being an Albanian is very easy, but being a Muslim is the right question' (Nuriya). She considered that being part of a nation was simple, but to be a Muslim was more difficult as this required one to understand Islam. Amina pointed out that living in a society in which everyone was not a Muslim, but in which Christian and Muslim groups lived side by side, was sometimes challenging. However, she thought

that Islam had a good position in the Republic of Macedonia (Amina). If the national, or ethnic, identities of the women interviewed were mainly defined in relation to Macedonian identity, their Muslim identity seemed to be more multi-layered as it was sketched in relation to Albanian cultural traditions, womanhood and Macedonian citizenship.

## 6 Islam: Gathering Together and Making a Difference

By the analytical level of interaction discussed in this chapter I refer to the dynamics of concrete situations and everyday contacts that the Albanian Muslim women had in various contexts. At this level the focus is placed particularly on the emergence and maintenance of identity in these situated interactions (cf. Verkuyten 2006, 19). Through these interactions, identity can be studied 'in terms of an ongoing process of social definitions and negotiations' (Liebkind 2010, 19). This view of dynamic processes seeks to understand where Islamic features can be situated and how they are expressed in these processes of interaction, as well as whether Islam has a role in the identity formation of the Albanian women at this interactional level.

Firstly, I focus on the diversifying Islamic field in the Republic of Macedonia, the different aspects of Islamic plurality and how the Albanian women spoke about them in the interviews and what kinds of identity constructions these opinions described. Secondly, I examine questions concerning the ways in which Islamic religiosity can be shared and divided in the field of study. For this purpose I discuss aspects of gender and complementarity, Islam and its different manifestations across the generations, Islam in different local contexts, as well as Islamic celebrations and rites of transition. My aim is to illustrate what these descriptions of Islamic religiosity may tell us about the Albanian women's identities and the meanings of Islam for their identities in these situated interactions. The last part of the chapter examines the Muslim way of life; how Islam is enacted through the choices the Albanian women make in their everyday lives, relationships they have with others and in the social responsibility they are ready to take. In this part the focus is on how these actions can be perceived as manifestations of engagement with a Muslim identity or a distance taken from it. Or, briefly, what kind of role Islam played in interactions with its actual social environment.

### Increasing Islamic Plurality

*Aida: I am Muslim, they are Muslim too [...] but they are, they look different [...] I look different.  
(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

In this section I will discuss the impact of the societal changes on the Islamic religious field in the Republic of Macedonia. These changes have tended to fragment the Muslim community and increase Islamic pluralism, which has manifested itself, for example, at the level of doctrinal differences, as well as in the emergence of new Islamic movements and groups and a more diverse supply of Islamic publications. Some of these phenomena might be motivated by an improved contact with the global Umma, others maybe more the results of the societal and social interplay. Aida's statement, with which I preface this section referred to Muslim identities in the Republic of Macedonia which might differ in their appearance, that is, as a part of interaction in the social sphere, and these differences could also indicate to which group the Muslims belonged. Thus, clothing might function as a sign of certain kind of religious identity, membership and exclusion, which crossed the boundaries of a religious group (cf. Ammerman 2003, 220).

The dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia, whose politics were mainly favourable to authoritarian secularism, resulted firstly in the disappearance of state control over religious institutions and, as a consequence of this, conflicts could come to the surface within them (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 42). These developments have also become visible in the religious institutions of the Republic of Macedonia, motivated mainly by an interest in gaining positions of power within them (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 10). The dissolution of the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia in 1993 led to the establishment of five new Islamic communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia and in Serbia. Their administrative limits, as well as their mutual relationships are still to some extent in the process of being defined (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 10). Through reconnection with the global Umma, the Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia has established new contacts and reinforced old ones with other Islamic communities in wider, both global and local, contexts. (Cf. Clayer 2001, 197–198; Interview 10)

Bougarel and Iseni state that the Islamic revival in the Republic of Macedonia has been relatively fast at the level of infrastructure and religious activities. On the other hand, the monopoly that the main Islamic religious institution has traditionally enjoyed in the Republic of Macedonia finds itself currently in a new situation as new actors, such as youth organizations, preachers with neo-Salafist backgrounds, tarikats or neo-Sufi movements, have entered the religious field. (Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 42; Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 10) The improved capability to invest in religious activities in the public sphere may

have bases in the contacts between Islamic religious institutions and certain political parties or sectors within the state's administration. The attempts of political instrumentalization of religious institutions have further encouraged the surfacing of their internal tensions and even led to severe crises. (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 10–11)

The existence of two types of neo-Salafist movements which can be considered as religiously conservative and even fundamentalist in their understanding of Islam, as they aim to return to Islam of the pious ancestors,<sup>99</sup> can be distinguished in the western Balkans. According to Bougarel and Iseni, one of them could be characterized as pietist and other as jihadist. Often these neo-Salafists are qualified as Wahhabis in the local Balkan and Western media, even though Wahhabism is a form of neo-Salafism belonging to the Hanbali school of law, which is mainly found in Saudi Arabia<sup>100</sup>. (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 9) The more rigorous interpretations of Islam, which in the Republic of Macedonia are often the neo-Salafist movements of the pietist type, have, among others, challenged the Islamic community and its unity (Iseni 2007a, 27).

This emergence of new Islamic groups which have established various activities has been one of the consequences of the first post-socialist law on religion (1997). Probably at least some of these groups have been financed from abroad (cf. Interview 10). Krasniqi states that the external influence of Muslim organizations has reached the Republic of Macedonia particularly through Kosovo. As a result of the war in Kosovo in 1998–1999, many faith-based aid agencies came to the Republic of Macedonia to help the Kosovar refugees and thereafter expanded their activities. It is claimed that there are several Saudi-funded mosques in the Albanian villages. Also power struggles of some kind seem to be going on between the more radical and the moderate mainstream groups. Krasniqi calls the more radical orientation in the Republic of Macedonia the Wahhabis, a view Bougarel and Iseni (2007) however do not share. Currently the representatives of more radical Islam would, according to Krasniqi, control five mosques

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<sup>99</sup> Known in Arabic as *al-salaf al-salih*, meaning the first generations of Muslims.

<sup>100</sup> Neo-Salafism in the Balkans does not necessarily mean, for example, that the believers would deny their roots whose origins are in the Hanafi school of law. Thus the use of the term Wahhabi in the Western Balkan context is often missapplied and risks veiling a better understanding concerning the different developments within the Muslim community. (Bougarel and Iseni 2007, 9)

in Skopje. Also, reis-ul-ulema Rexhepi formed a petition addressed to the Macedonian government and the international community asking that they would take measures against the radical groups, as they were distorting the image of the Muslims. However, all of this might have been politically motivated, as Krasniqi considers that the major Albanian political parties<sup>101</sup> have struggled for years for control over the Islamic Religious Community. (Krasniqi 2010, 29) This could explain Aida's observations, detailed in Chapter Five, regarding changes of people in certain posts.

Of the Neo-Sufi groups in the Republic of Macedonia, Popovic mentions the Nurdjus-Fethullahidjis, adepts of the Turkish modernist author and Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen, who have based their network and activities in a number of Balkan states. They publish the newspaper *Zaman* (Time) and have established some private secondary schools and religious schools. (Popovic 2002, 13) Other organizations of Turkish origin have also increased their presence in the country in the areas of religion, culture and education. Both Macedonians and Albanians tend to consider Turkey to be an ally, but not a mutual one. For the Macedonian state Turkey offers a counterbalance in relations with Greece, while the Albanians see in Turkey a traditional and a historical ally against the neighbouring Orthodox states.<sup>102</sup> (Krasniqi 2010, 30–31) All of these factors contribute to, and support diversity and diversification of the Muslim identities in the Republic of Macedonia. Most of the Albanian women interviewed stated that one could find many groups or communities in contemporary Macedonian society (e.g. Wafa; Amala; Nuriya; Khadija; Nawal; Qadr; Aida). Some women said that the Islamic field was becoming more diverse. In addition to the Sunni Muslims and tarikats, such as Ruf'ais and Bektashis, the informants also mentioned the presence of people known as *mujahideens* (Amala; Interview 12; Khadija; Aida). Nuriya spoke about the presence of Hanafi and Salafi Muslims (Nuriya). She was probably referring in this instance to the Sunni Muslim majority (Hanafi) and Islamic groups with stricter dogmatic views, which

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<sup>101</sup> Of these the most important ones are the Democratic Union for Integration (Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim - BDI) and the Albanian Democratic Party (Partia Demokratike Shqiptare – PDSH) (Krasniqi 2010, 29).

<sup>102</sup> The Islamic and Ottoman heritage of the Republic of Macedonia remains a source of disagreements between the Albanians and the Macedonians. While Albanians tend to consider that the Ottoman heritage historically belongs to them and also in terms of conviction, the Macedonian state can perceive it as something that belongs to all the citizens as a cultural heritage, as well as to the country's Turkish minority. (Krasniqi 2010, 30–31)

were smaller in number (Salafi). The stricter Islamic interpretations gave rise to a variety of reactions among the women. Aida stated that mujahideens purposely made the Islamic faith into something different. Men who belonged to this group wore white clothing, beard and short pants; details that aimed at following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. (Amala; Aida; Interview 10) The followers of stricter Islam might be labelled in the interviews as Wahhabis. Aida described the relationship mujahideen group had with the others:

*Aida: Those people, mujahideens, they they don't even speak to other [people] for instance.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Aida: Aa they have their own places where they go.*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Aida: They have their own shops were they buy [...] and they don't go out, they don't buy in different places, they don't go to a coffee bars, they go only to a sweet stores [...] where there is no alcohol, no, nothing.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: They don't speak to like, people like me [smiles] [...] or aa when they go to mosque, they have a different kind of praying [...] and in the middle of the praying, where everybody is praying, they stand up and go [...] even that the others are like this [demonstrates the position], they just jump of [over] them and they go.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Aida: So this is the, the relation between two different dimensions of...*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: Muslim faith.*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Aida distanced herself from how the stricter Islamic groups behaved and lived, and could not identify herself with them. She also mentioned that these people would not even speak to her, as her way of being a Muslim differed too drastically from theirs. There were even differences in the religious practice itself. This kind of behaviour, leaving the mosque before the end of the prayer, was most likely negatively received by the majority Muslim community, as individuals should have the opportunity to concentrate uninterruptedly only on God in prayer. Stricter Islamic interpretations, however, occasionally held that it was sufficient to perform only that part of the prayer, which was known as *farz*; that is, practices that God has commanded and that all the believers must perform, such as the five pillars (cf. Bringa 1995, 160). These are based on the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. Aida thought that social pressure played a role here and increased the perceivable expressions of Islam in these groups. If people did not



attend prayers, their absence might be discussed and not approved. The same kind of pressure might exist with respect to the clothing. (Aida) Wafa for her part said that she had difficulties to understand why Bektashis had problems and were not free, when the members of the movements with beards (these groups are known in Albanian sometimes as *mjekëroshe*, meaning ‘the ones with beards’), who could even appear frightening to others, were tolerated. She thought that this was a political problem. (Wafa) Like Aida, Wafa distanced herself from the stricter Islamic interpretations and identified herself with the Bektashis, which also was a religious minority in the country. Wafa’s and Aida’s views demonstrated the difference they saw between their own groups and the stricter Islamic groups. These women wished to express that their identities as Muslims, belonging to both majority and minority groups, were different and that this difference could be perceived both in wider social and Islamic spaces, in interactions between people and the societal positions of the Islamic groups.

Aida estimated furthermore that interest in religion in general was increasing in the Republic of Macedonia. Regarding Muslims she said that the number of people dressed in black (referring probably to Muslim women) had increased and people were changing and they thought that they now were becoming real Muslims. Aida was however not sure about the exact nature of these developments; these were her impressions, and she was upset about the status of Islam:

*Aida: Aa there are two, two levels [...] there are levels of these people covered in black [...] which maybe thirty or fifty percent of them are paid to do it [...] and there are people that totally don't know the religion [...] and they say they are Muslim [...] they eat pork, they don't aa, for Ramadan that they don't fast[...] et cetera [...] and they say th that they are Muslim, when you ask them why, "well, because my parents are Muslim" [...] so there is no middle, in the middle you can find only ten percent of people being a Muslim as as they need to be, like I don't know, education at the same time, I mean modern people [...] Muslim at the same time, respecting the religion [...] so, in all the dimensions [...] you can find very little percent of that kind of people, most of them are either this [covered in black], either totally not knowing nothing.*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Aida was not satisfied with the situation in the Macedonian Islamic field, or with the groups it consisted of. She did not appreciate all the motivations people might have for calling themselves Muslims. And furthermore, she did not consider them as such, when they did not

know the basics of the Islamic faith, were not practising the religion or were allegedly receiving money in return for their membership in the group. According to her, people were paid for their membership to a certain Islamic group, meaning that their motivation for being part of it was economic. For Aida kinship did not function as a sufficient 'statement' of someone's Muslimness. While the extremes, both strict and very secularized were present, the more moderate ways of being a Muslim were missing or scarce. This 'middle way' seemed to be for Aida the way Muslims should preferably be: having an education and simultaneously respecting Islam. She had difficulties in identifying with the other ways of being a Muslim. In this excerpt having a Muslim identity included fasting during Ramazan and dietary restrictions. It was not linked to ways of dressing, kinship or an economically motivated membership in a group.

In the interview Zainab discussed the Wahhabis. She saw them as Muslims who wanted to practise Islam more deeply in the way they understood it. She was not aware of the existence of Wahhabis or other Islamic groups in the Republic of Macedonia. Zainab did not see Muslims as divided into different movements as such, but thought instead that Muslims had different ways of expressing Islam. However, Zainab reflected on the issue of the relationships between the different groups of Muslims and thought that people might have a range of opinions and discussions concerning aspects of Islam such as growing a beard, but that it did not mean that people with different opinions would only argue. Sometimes one could learn new things about Islam from each other. (Zainab) In Zainab's view, people were continuously learning about Islam and there were always new things to learn. Zainab had a more moderate position in relation to other groups. She did not seem to experience them as a threat, but instead as enriching elements within the Islamic tradition, contributing different ways of expressing an identity as a Muslim. Even though there might be disagreements between different groups regarding certain things, diversity was not merely a source of arguments and disapproval.

Nawal also said that the interest in Islam in her own community was greatly increasing. She described the situation in the following way:

*Nawal: Well for example aa here we have aa different kind of tradition of religion, Muslim religion [...] you can see people in the street which are wearing the beards [...] the long beards, and they are not talking to the womans [...] not giving hands, this is not good I think so, aa for example their wives are going all black in dressed [...] I don't think that it's good you know [...] my religion is saying you should, shouldn't go uncovered, I mean naked.*

*(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)*

Like Aida, Wafa and Zainab, Nawal spoke about Muslims who are growing beards, implementing gender segregation in public space and wearing distinguishing garments. This was something that Nawal did not appreciate as she understood Islam and having a Muslim identity differently. For her it meant not to dress in uncovered manner, or to be naked, and implicitly that it was possible for men and women to interact in public, as she did not appreciate gender segregation. Nawal thought also that covering made a person actually more interesting instead of unnoticeable: 'You know everything what is mystic is more attractive to a people' (Nawal). Her opinion was that "if you are completely extreme it's not good" (Nawal). Extreme ideas did not fit into the religiously liberal Nawal's thoughts about being a Muslim and having a Muslim identity. Qadr considered that the women who wore entirely black dresses were not Muslims, but rather 'it's only part of the sect, something of the[...], or misinterpretation I would say [...] of the religion, because you never, you never really read in Qur'an that the womens have to be with all this black things [...] it, it's not described' (Qadr). Aida, Wafa, Nawal and Qadr all distanced themselves from the stricter Islamic interpretations: Aida, because she could not recognize her religion in it, Wafa because she was unable to understand why her religious group had fewer rights than these stricter ones, Nawal because she did not consider the extreme solutions good and Qadr because she thought that people belonging to these stricter groups had misunderstood Islam. To these women to perceive Muslim identity meant connecting Islam more to the current situation, giving same rights to all groups, eschewing extreme ideas and knowing Islam better. Zainab however had a more moderate view of these stricter Islamic interpretations, as she gathered them all under the Islamic umbrella and perceived them as a part of Muslim identity or Muslim identities.

The stricter Islamic groups could also be seen not to be recognizing the traditional Islam in the Republic of Macedonia, but instead aiming to return to the times of the Prophet. For an outsider it seemed difficult for these Muslims to change or to accept or respect new

things and modernisation. It could be that a woman in these Islamic groups was expected to follow her husband's will, and veiling was encouraged. One reference person stated that 'our tradition[al] Islam is against [...] this, people who are trying to bring the time back' (Interview 10). These narratives indicated that the Islamic field in the Republic of Macedonia is headed in a direction that fractures the unity of the Muslim community and Muslim identities as Islam acquires more diverse forms.

The motivations that people might have for belonging to these stricter groups were questioned. A reference person suspected, like Aida above, that some people were members of these Islamic groups solely because of the economic benefit they might gain as a member and this was explained by a simple fact: 'In this region when, you know, the level of unemployment is too high, everybody will do everything just to make sure that [...]he has enough to eat, for eating, for the next month' (Interview 10). This person had witnessed changes in people's religious behaviour and in their ways of expressing their Muslim identity, when they had left the group behind. Positive positioning towards a cultural development that Islam could support, could be hard to dovetail with the religiously fundamentalist, sometimes even violent, Islamic ideologies, which often grew out of unemployment, social and economic problems (cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 240), as was pointed out in the excerpts above.

In the Republic of Macedonia, a concern has been growing regarding the fear of a radicalization of the Muslim communities and the activities of foreign organisations have been monitored closely. There have also been attempts to use the more radical Islam to legitimize an anti-Albanian stance and to instill fear in the public. (Krasniqi 2010, 30) Krasniqi claims that these new Islamic groups, labelled as Salafis and Wahhabis, were signs of a radically different form of Islam than what was traditionally typical for the Republic of Macedonia. Wearing a *niqab* and growing a long beard, which the women and the reference person spoke about, were manifestations of this type of Islam. However, there is a practical and analytical problem regarding the use of term Wahhabism while referring to any kind of group that differed from the traditional Balkan Muslim groups and their practices. Local populations might use the term with the aim of discrediting the adversaries in the possible power struggles within Islamic Religious Community. (Cf. Krasniqi 2010, 32–33)

Khadija, who belonged to the Bektashi tarikat, thought that there were problems between the various Islamic groups regarding the question of whose religious path was the right and true one. She was convinced that what the imams taught did not contain true aspects of Islam. Furthermore there was, she thought, a lack of Bektashi literature in the country and she was of the opinion that the Bektashi works could not be published in the Republic of Macedonia. The Sunnis, or the Yazids<sup>103</sup> as Khadija named them, used different Islamic literature and there was according to her a language-related difference as well: Sunnis would offer books in Arabic and Bektashis in Albanian (cf. Norton 2001, 174–175). Khadija thought that nobody could understand works in Arabic and they were therefore not very useful. Of the Bektashi magazines published in Albanian Khadija mentioned the monthly *Urtësia*. Khadija was also upset about one event related to the funeral ceremony of a Sunni Muslim. She said that the imam had refused to bury the deceased until a certain amount of money was collected and given to him. Khadija said that the imams set their own prices for their services and that even in her village this kind of behaviour had taken place. By contrast, the Bektashi babas never asked money for their services. (Khadija) Khadija summed up her opinion by stating: ‘Muslim community [...] and especially this area here, I don’t like [...] the Muslim way’ (Khadija). She could not identify with the mainstream Islamic way of life in the Republic of Macedonia. She had negative experiences and opinions regarding the Sunnis and had the feeling that the Bektashis had been marginalized in Macedonian society. For Khadija the feeling of otherness seemed to mark her identity as a Muslim. Here also surfaced her dissatisfaction with the prevailing situation with regard to religious issues. Khadija thought that appropriate Islamic education should be available in a language people could understand and that religious conviction should not be used for economic benefit. According to Khadija there seemed to be a clash between Islamic groups about who was right in religious issues and whose Muslim identity was the right one.

Nuriya for her part saw that the different Islamic groups and movements were all seeking the truth and the right path in their own ways. She thought that the different groups had some kind of contact with each other in the current circumstances, but that the situation was not

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<sup>103</sup> Yazid was an Umayyad Caliph whose troops killed Imam Husain – who is a particularly important personality in Shi’ism – in the battle of Karbala. Shi’ites may use the term when they speak about Sunnites and it has a negative connotation.

the same as it had been in the time of the Prophet. She described the relationship between the Hanafis and Salafis in earlier times:

*Nuriya [through an interpreter]: They have never insulted [...] each others, like th their aim always has been [...] they have always accepted the other's opinion and they have never fought with each other [...] their aim it has always been to find the truth no matter [what], like there has not been a need to convince you that [...] I am talking the truth and you to convince me that you know [that] you are talking the truth...*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Nuriya: It's been the common sense the truth itself, so she [Nuriya] says they [the Islamic groups] meet, but it's not like it has been at that time, no insultings...*

*NR: So...*

*Nuriya: ...No accepting anybody's opinion and...*

*NR: Okay, so today it's, there are some complications?*

*Nuriya: Complications?! There has been a perfect example at that time! (Nuriya, 22 years old, village dweller)*

Nuriya's view concerning the Salafi group was tolerant. She considered that everyone had one's own way of looking for the right path and that one did not necessarily need to try to convince the others of its righteousness. However, the situation between the different Islamic groups was not what it had been in earlier Islamic times, according to her. Nuriya had probably read or learned about earlier phases of Islamic society and perceived these as the ideal one should strive for. She did not delineate between the Muslim groups and their identities, but instead saw them as united by a common sense of truth particularly in the historical context.

The women could name some of the different Islamic groupings, but often they were relatively unaware of them (e.g. Farah; Nuriya). This could be an indication of the marginality of the groups and their low profile within the society, or of the women's distant or in-existent contacts with these groups. Farah said that completely veiled Muslim women were a rare phenomenon in the Macedonian streets:

*Farah: I've seen some of the, like couple, two or three womens that they cover all of themselves [...] and that is not part of that what I know [...] so that must be something else [...] they are so individual cases [...] I wouldn't say there are like waves of such [...] they are three or fou, maximum three women I have seen [...] maybe it has been the same one, I don't know, 'cause you cannot see their face.*

*(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

However Aida, for instance, as we saw earlier, thought that the percentage of people belonging to these groups, or group, was remarkably high (Aida). Thus, the views of these two women draw relatively contrasting pictures of the situation. Fatima for her part said that as long as the members of different movements within society called themselves Muslims, she would not have anything against them. She was of the opinion that members of different Islamic groups had some contact and gathered together, for example, for seminars. These contacts, according to Fatima, aimed at discussions and exchange and different opinions could be expressed in them. People from different groups treated each other with respect and did not try to convince others to change the Islamic path they were following. This was her view as a Muslim following the interpretation of Islam of the Hanafi school of law: 'We are all equal and the main purpose in Islam is like to show the unity of all' (Fatima). Fatima, like Nuriya, also thought that different groups were aspiring to the same goal of righteousness and truth. However, in the current circumstances she wished that the different Islamic groups would have better relations with each other, as there had been some conflicts. (Fatima) From Amina's perspective the relations between different Islamic organizations were good, as were those between Muslims from different social groups. She also judged that the people from different social groups in the Republic of Macedonia did have contacts with each other. (Amina) Thus, she perceived the situation as rather harmonious. Fatima wished that different Islamic interpretations, which valued the true aspects of Islam, could be applied in contemporary circumstances, 'because there is a difference between how it was before and how it is today' (Fatima). Both Nuriya and Fatima perceived the ideal way of articulating the relations between the groups in the Islamic past. Fatima also emphasized that the meaning of Islam and being a Muslim, and having a Muslim identity, was being equal with others and demonstrating unity.

Amala, who was more representative of the Bektashi view of the situation, perceived these relations between the Islamic groups as generally not good in the Republic of Macedonia (Amala). One reference person however saw them in a more optimistic light:

*Albanians, Bosniaks, Roma, and Turks and others, most of them have Islamic religion[...], they go in mosque together, they pray together, they celebrate together, they mourn together in case of something go wrong in life, life is not only celebrations [...] [but also] the deaths and bad days, we share the good, the bad not only with the Muslims, but also with the other religions.*  
(Interview 10)

This excerpt emphasizes the element of sharing in Islamic religious practice and in the course of various everyday challenges. The reference person furthermore stated that good and the bad days were shared with other religious groups. Thus, the circumstances people were living in united those from different religions and in a sense helped them to cross the borders between different groups. Regarding the linguistic diversity within the Muslim community, also mentioned by the reference person, Khadija pointed out that the Bektashi tarikat had some Albanian, Turkish and Macedonian-speaking members (Khadija). Sunnite Nawal thought that the relationships between different linguistic groups were not bad and that there were contacts between these groups (Nawal). Hawwa described the diversity within the global Islamic tradition, its relation to locality and its ties to cultural heritage:

*Hawwa [through an interpreter]: So there is not single unique tradition for all the Muslims globally, 'cause they also are from different kind of ethn, nationalities and so on [...] the there is, it exist[s] that common tradition for the Muslims from all the world, but aa, but also it has that influence of tradition that aa, that individual belongs to that nationality or things, and so on [...] from Afghanistan Muslim has a different tradition from us here.*  
(Hawwa, 22 years old, city dweller)

In this excerpt Hawwa reflected on and acknowledged the diversity of Islamic traditions in different parts of the world and their relation to local cultures. She considered that what it meant to be a Muslim and to have a Muslim identity differed according to the place one was living in and was also related to one's nationality. Although Muslims did also share one common Islamic tradition. Farah described this situation as an 'interesting rainbow' (Farah) and Hanifa as 'everything mixed' (Hanifa). For Mahabba there was a difference between the traditions of the Muslims worldwide and the tradition of Islam in itself (Mahabba). Amina saw the global Islamic tradition as something great (Amina). For Qadr some of the Islamic traditions were the same everywhere in the world, 'but who respect [the traditions] and who not, it's a personal thing[...] already' (Qadr). Thus, the women had



views about the variety in the culturally and doctrinally linked Islamic traditions, a difference between Islam and the traditions, as well as between the different degrees of devotion to the Islamic tradition that believers could have.

Khadija thought that even though an important number of Muslims were Sunnis, they were not following the right path. She saw the Bektashis as more tolerant, more educated and more responsible than the people who went to the mosque – the Sunnis. The Sunnis opposed public positions of the Bektashis and performances done by them in the Republic of Macedonia because ‘Yazids [Sunnis], they are saying that [...] the Bektashis are with no religion’ (Khadija). However, the Islamic Religious Community wanted to gather the Bektashis under their organizational umbrella. (Khadija) Hence, for Khadija the various Islamic interpretations seemed to make a drastic difference. When reflecting upon diversity within Islam, Sunnite Zainab thought that Islam was one religion, but people were different. Thus, ‘all of them [people] in different way express aa the feeling about religion’ (Zainab). Sunnite Aida saw also that people ‘feel the faith differently and they show it differently’ (Aida). Sunnite Qadr claimed that religion in a multicultural society should be more inclined towards the private sphere:

*Qadr: Macedonia has it's multicultural, it's multireligioned places and if you do that, if you give your view like in collective, in society, sometimes [it] is misunderstood [...] sometime[s] you [can] be excluded maybe from the society [...] so this is why [...] you keep that like more private.*

*(Qadr, 27 years old, village dweller)*

In order to improve social harmony and to avoid misunderstandings, Qadr considered it preferable to place religion more in the private sphere of life. Otherwise, misunderstandings in relation to the religious questions could result in people feeling excluded from the multicultural society. This could also be linked to the reinforcement of the stereotypes, or the experience of threat or fear from the side of others. However, for example Hawwa thought that religion was always a collective factor, as a person could not live without other people (Hawwa). Sabah, like Mahabba in Chapter Five, saw religion as something that was meant for everyone in the community and therefore it could not be treated as a private matter (Sabah). Habiba thought that religion could be used within the society to achieve or to strive for something positive, but not to create something negative. If one religion

was criticized by another, it did not lead to positive results within the society. (Habiba)

Briefly, the women had different views on how Muslim identity could be expressed and where Islam could be situated in Macedonian society. To situate the religious identity in the private sphere could protect it more efficiently and reduce stereotyping. However, Islam was also considered to have significant public and collective dimensions and if used in an appropriate way it could also contribute to the creation of something positive at the societal level. According to the women's descriptions Muslim identity seemed to be located at the crossroads of public and private spheres. It was also mentioned that level of devotion and the way of practising Islam was tied to individuals. The Albanian women had wide ranging views on the issue of Islamic diversity. On the one hand they seemed to accept it and even perceive it as a historical characteristic of Islam, but on the other they could see important differences between traditions and interpretations and distance themselves and their identities as Muslims and Muslim women from these or wish that the circumstances would improve.

### **Islamic Organizations and Publications**

The generous supply of groupings that contribute to the re-Islamization in the Republic of Macedonia have found fertile ground for their existence in the societal disorder, which has had for instance political, economic and ideological dimensions (cf. Clayer 2001, 239). As the Islamic field becomes more diverse it can be more easily discerned through the increasing numbers of organizations and publications. Concerning the religiously oriented Islamic organizations or sections in the organisations for women, the Albanian women interviewed mentioned the *Merhamet* (Mercy or Compassion) (Farah; Nuriya; Fatima; Zainab) as well as a section for women established by the *Forum Islamik* (Islamic Forum) (Farah). Zainab also told that there was an organization for women only in Tetovo, called *Islami dhe Shkenca* (Islam and Science). In Skopje, Zainab knew of organizations that had a female section such as *Klubi Studentor* (Student Club), *Bamirësia* (Charity) and *Forumi Rinor Islam* (Islamic Youth Forum). In Zainab's interview there was also some discussion about the organization *Bamirësia* and that it had a strong male presentation (Zainab). Farah also spoke about a female section in the organization *Vizioni M* (Vision M). She said that this organization's goals were usually humanitarian. It provided different kind of help for people and kept a low profile in

its work. Farah also mentioned that Muslim women occasionally organized debates and events. (Farah) Aida said that in many cases the 'Muslim women' were not indicated in the name of the humanitarian organizations, but one could often find mainly Muslim women active in them (Aida).

Mahabba told that she was active in an organization outside the mosque community. The organization aimed at improving societal circumstances and during the holidays they would visit orphanages, for example. She also mentioned that there were women's organizations that worked to improve the status of women's rights within Macedonian society. (Mahabba) In Zainab's interview it was remarked that there were organizations which worked for women's status and rights, and organizations working against domestic violence. However, the interpreter and Zainab thought that the role of these was negligible, for example domestic violence was not discussed openly in society (Interview with Zainab). According to Todorovska every fourth woman in the Republic of Macedonia is a victim of domestic violence (Todorovska 2009).

Amina for her part belonged to an organization with religious values, outside the mosque community, but emphasized however that: 'I belong only to Allah, to God' (Amina). She said that in this position she could offer help to anyone and that she felt as if she belonged to all the people and in every group. (Amina) Amina's view sketches an image of a Muslim identity which crossed established borders and found unity with others in God. What the women stated about the field of Islamic organizations could be interpreted as meaning that they knew about the existence of these kinds of activities and even participated

in them to a certain extent. There was an awareness of the names of the organizations and their special domains. Some women also highlighted features that would refer to gender awareness or segregation within some of these organizations. It was assumed that Muslim women were active in the field of humanitarian work. Thus, in the field of Islamic organizations, women could find a space to concretely act upon their religiosities and faith, both as Muslims and women. Organizations could offer a frame of reference for their identities as Muslims, but also more particularly as Muslim women. Due to features that emphasized gender awareness, these organizations might also function as meeting points where opinions and different understandings of what it meant to be a Muslim and a woman were brought together. That is, they were contexts in which women negotiated their identities as Muslims and women.

According to the Albanian women Islamic publications and magazines are, available in several different languages in the Republic of Macedonia: Albanian, Arabic, Macedonian, Turkish, Bosnian, Roma and English. Amid the Albanian ones, the names that were mentioned included *Hëna e re* (New Moon), *Vepra* (Work) (Zainab), *Etika* (Ethics) (Mahabba), *Alb-Muslim* (Farah) *Albislam* (Hawwa, Amina; Zainab), *Zaman* (Time or Era, translated from Turkish into Albanian) (Hanifa; Nuriya; Fatima; Amina; Mahabba) and *Besnika* (Devout) (Zainab). Zainab wished there would be more Islamic literature available in Macedonian (Zainab). Habiba said that translated texts, for instance from Arabic, were available in Albanian. She and Aisha stated that religious literature was available in every language that was used in religious education or spoken as a mother tongue in the Republic of Macedonia. (Habiba; Aisha) Sabah mentioned that she knew of religious literature available in Arabic and Albanian, but considered that there were no religious magazines published in the country (Sabah). In the names of these magazines that the women mentioned the Albanian and Muslim identities could intertwine. Furthermore many of them were published in Albanian only, which could be perceived as being logical, as it was the mother tongue of the state's Muslim majority. This might however be an indication of the already mentioned Albanization of Muslim identity or of a certain kind of nationalization of Islam in the Republic of Macedonia. This could also be a supporting element in underpinning the difference between ethnic and religious groups. However, what the women said about the Islamic publications was mainly their names and they mentioned predominantly those published in their mother tongue. In the Republic of Macedonia one could read and study religion regardless of one's mother tongue,

but there was also a wish that more publications would be produced in Macedonian, probably so that a wider public could learn about Islam.

The monthly magazine of the Islamic Religious Community, *Hëna e re*, included Islamic local news. Furthermore educational, theological and dogmatic issues related to Islam were discussed within its pages. The IRC also had a website where one could, for example, ask questions online and had access to the magazine. (Interview 10) The Islamic Religious Community published books which they considered followed their standards and expectations and which treated topics in line with tolerance and advancement. At the time of this study, relatively few translations were produced in the Republic of Macedonia, as translating was expensive and there was a lack of translators. It was pointed out that Arabic and Turkish, languages one often translated from, were mainly mastered by the people who worked for the rijaset of the Islamic Religious Community. The reference person stressed on this point that the IRC aimed at producing high standard services and that as an organization it would rather leave something undone than do it in the wrong way. (Interview 10) In addition to what the reference person said regarding the publishing activities of the IRC, Nawal had an impression that there were local publishing houses which published Islamic books in the cities of Tetovo, Skopje and Gostivar (Nawal).

What the Albanian women said in the interviews about the field of Islamic organizations and publications spoke for a diversifying Islamic field which offered support to and validated the Muslim identities of speakers of different mother tongues. This development was also creating certain limits, as these contexts, spaces and information access points tended to be dominated by the Albanian language. Islamic organizations could also function as contexts in which the women's identities as Muslims and as Muslim women were negotiated, as it was within these structures and in the framework of these activities that the question of gender might arise.

To sum up, in the Republic of Macedonia, a somewhat visible dichotomy seemed to exist between the 'Islam of the mosque' represented by the Islamic religious authorities and the 'Islam of the tekke' considered by some as deviating or simply differing notably from the first mentioned (cf. Popovic 2002, 16) – a feature which also emerged in my material. During recent years these two fractions have been accompanied by at least two more: the 'Islam of the reform' and the 'liberal Islam', which increase Islamic plurality and the shapes it can take.

Attempts to maintain, at least partially, a monopoly over Islam in the Republic of Macedonia could be perceived in those actions of the Islamic Religious Community which tended to take inadequate account of the minorities (Field diary; cf. Bringa 1995, 200). This concerned all Islamic groupings which were not entirely in line with the Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia. These groups were, nonetheless, relatively marginal. Noticing and thoroughly implementing the status of minority groups could improve societal harmony, as it was the rights and statuses of minorities that so often have been at stake in various conflictual developments. It could also be that those dissensions inside the Macedonian Muslim community which surfaced in the interviews might also be due to political, doctrinal or personal motivations of different rivalries within it (cf. Bougarel 2005, 15).

## Shared and Divided Islamic Religiosity

This section examines the more practical and everyday ways of living in Islam in the Republic of Macedonia; how these manifested in my material and how they are both shared and divided from the women's point of view. Firstly, I discuss aspects related to gender and Islamic religiosity. Secondly, the differences and similarities between Islamic ways of living among the representatives of different generations and in different local contexts are observed. I also present the viewpoints of the women on Islamic celebrations and rites of transition in the Republic of Macedonia. Finally, I discuss how Muslim ways of life were acknowledged and rendered meaningful for the women more generally and in their everyday choices. Throughout this section I aim at illustrating and arguing at which points the identity construction of the Albanian women was in question, how it was related to Islam and what kind of emphasis Islam gained within it.

### Gender and Complementarity?

*...They [your wives] are clothing for you and you are clothing for them.*

*(The Qur'an 2:187, partly)*

The equality of all believing Muslims can be considered as a permeating principle in the Qur'an, even though women in the Quranic text are often mentioned in relation to men and the text is very gender-conscious (Akar 2004, 161–162). Mainly because the Islamic interpreta-

tive tradition has predominantly been in the hands of men until recent times, this idea of equality has often been less emphasized. More recent interpretations frequently perceive equality as gender complementarity; men and women are considered as equal, but different and therefore have different, but equally valuable tasks. (Akar 2004, 163–164; Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 187; Sakaranaho 1998, 205) The legal anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini calls these types of recent interpretations Neo-Traditionalist<sup>104</sup> (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 17). Islamic theology may also be interpreted as saying that everything in the world has its proper way of functioning as well as a particular task. This would apply also to men and women and therefore the gender roles too would be clearly defined. (Hallenberg 2008, 80) Mir-Hosseini argues however that the classical Islamic jurists were guided in their understanding of sacred texts by their outlook and in discerning the terms of the sharia ‘they were constrained by a set of legal and gender assumptions and theories that reflected the state of knowledge and normative values of their time’ (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 10).

As in all places, but often in a particularly accentuated manner within the Islamic cultural sphere, women may be perceived as determined by their gender. Due to the characteristics generally considered to be feminine, women can be seen as more suitable for some tasks, but not for others. (Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 187) However, Mir-Hosseini considers that marriage, the family and women’s status in the Qur’an are human categories and practices that are linked to customs in Arabia. Thus, ‘women’s status and gender relations are neither created by sharia *rulings* nor divinely ordained and immutable’. (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 11, Arabic orthography simplified) She argues also that there needs to be a constant reform in the rulings related to the women and

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<sup>104</sup> Mir-Hosseini thinks that one can find, broadly speaking, three distinct discourses in Islamic legal thought on gender rights. She has named them as Traditionalist, Neo-Traditionalist (commonly known as Modernist) and Reformist. Of these the two first-mentioned are premised on diverse forms of inequality between the genders and the third argues for equality. The Traditionalist approach is the discourse that can be found in the classical sharia texts. The Neo-Traditionalist discourse was developed in the early part of the twentieth century and reflected the modern legal codes in the Muslim countries. The third discourse, the Reformist approach, initially emerged over the last two decades of the twentieth century and is still being shaped. Mir-Hosseini estimates that within this latter discourse gender equality in Islamic law is achievable. (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 1) Reformist discourse does not perceive Islam and modernity as opposed, but as compatible. It also contends that the human understanding of Islam is flexible and that Islamic tenets can be interpreted so as to encourage ‘both plurality and democracy, and that Islam allows change in the face of time, space and experience’. (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 20)

family so that they would reflect the spirit of Islamic revelation and justice in Islam (Mir-Hosseini 2003, 11). Mir-Hosseini adds furthermore that:

*[T]he genesis of gender inequality in Islamic law lies in the inner contradictions between the ideals of sharia and the social norms of Muslim cultures. While sharia ideals call for freedom, justice and equality, Muslim social norms and structures in the formative years of Islamic law impeded their realization.*  
(Mir-Hosseini 2003, 21, Arabic orthography simplified)

The human rights that Islam guarantees for all individuals, regardless of their gender were emphasized several times in my interviews with the women (e.g. Aisha; Mahabba). Among them Amina discussed the concept of equality and claimed that even though human rights might be part of the constitutions of several states, they were not fully implemented. This implementation would only be possible through Islam and Islamic principles. (Amina) Aisha described this equality as a universal human right, which was not given by any other religion than Islam. She continued by stating: 'In Islamic religion you cannot step the the human rights, somebody's human rights [in order] to get something, like a profit' (Aisha). Hanifa also highlighted, in a similar fashion to Aisha, that men and women were equal in front of Allah (Hanifa). In addition to the equality of all human beings, Mahabba explained that in the focus of the Islamic faith there were different kinds of rules and principles that indicated how one should live (Mahabba). From a 'Western perspective' it can be demanding to understand the idea of gender complementarity which may often be a part of an Islamic way of living and which differentiates, to some extent, the expectations placed on men and women. This can become an even more complex issue in such cases in which the definition of gender of an individual is intrinsically difficult. The gender role is not always commensurate with the individual's gender identity, particularly if there is little space for interpretations of such identities. (Cf. Hallenberg 2008, 80) Amina, Mahabba, Hanifa and Aisha could see Islam offer an ideal frame of reference for the human rights and values that Mir-Hosseini discusses. The women saw the human rights and equality were guaranteed in relation to God and Islam, but thought also that there were certain focal rules and principles to be respected. The Albanian women tended to see the Muslim identity as protecting their



rights and position in the community, but also expecting from them certain concrete actions and ways of behaving.

One reference person commented upon the issue of gender and Islam through an interpreter:

*There are no objection[s] about [that] the woman is presenting the half of our society [...] and looking to the human way, the woman is fully equal with the man [...] you cannot even imagine one life without the existence of both genders [...] we believe and we think that the man and woman are equal but not the same, because, because of that difference, they can create the the things or they can continue the happy life [...] I'll give you one example [...] the two hands are equal but not the same [...] and only like this: they are not the same, they can help each other [...] aa I want to sitate one, one thought that was written by one Islamic writer, he said if, if the woman is the half of our society exactly, the other si... the other half was born by by other, by other womans. (Interview 12)*

The woman's importance was highlighted here in terms of the fact that each human being, be it a man or a woman, was brought to this world by a mother, a woman. Other ideas expressed seemed to refer to gender complementarity, which received criticism not only from Ziba Mir-Hosseini but also from Amina Wadud. She notes that this term was extensively employed in Islamist discussions and supported a vertical rhetoric of equality in which complementarity meant that:

*Each person, male or female, plays a significant yet gender-specific roles. All roles are necessary and good; however, their distinctions must remain beneficial to each other only within the stasis of particular determinations of "natural complementarity." This is a tantamount to saying that women's roles complement men's nature. This is not only harmonious and organic, such thinking asserts, it is divine. But such complementarity has an unequal power dimension. [...] The relative value of men's roles and women's roles in this fixed system says nothing about values attributed to those roles in the larger context of gender relations in family, community, and ultimately geo-politics. It rhetorically and actually constructs an unequal relationship which, if disrupted, destroys something inherent to "Islam". Thus complementary discourse is a direct by-product of double-talk. (Wadud 2007, 27–28)*

What Wadud refers to with the term double-talk is 'multivalent linguistic obscurities in meaning' (Wadud 2007, 25) and it was predominantly Muslim male double-talk that reflected and maintained male legitimacy and hierarchical privilege over women. Thus, 'woman is

not to man as man is to woman' (Wadud 2007, 26) and the gender complementarity could function as the basis of unequal relationships between genders.

Muslim intellectuals have often had a perception of human rights issues as thoroughly political questions linked to the interests of the Western world (Abou El Fadl, 2003, 305–306). However, how the Islamic states position themselves to the United Nations' system of human rights, for example, reflects the diversity of opinions held in the Islamic world regarding the issue (Kouros 2004, 138). In contemporary Islam, the attempts to return to an authentic Islamic identity may be marked by puritan orientations that resist 'the indeterminacy of the modern age by escaping to a strict literalism' and the Quranic text may become an only source of legitimacy (Abou El Fadl 2003, 308). In this orientation, which Khaled Abou El Fadl considers a dominant Islamic theological force, it has been regarded as imperative to return to the literal implementation of the commands and precedents of the Prophet and to strict adherence to a correct ritual form of Islam (Abou El Fadl 2003, 308). This puritan tendency might colour the tone of contemporary Islamic theology, but it cannot explain all of Islam. Islam and how it is understood takes the form of many expressions. The views above might demonstrate polarities in the Islamic field as well as how these issues generally are interpreted, but I find it necessary to emphasize that a diversity of perspectives does exist. This could also be seen in my material; for instance in the women's struggles to achieve more space and rights for themselves, and in their statements concerning the prevailing local interpretations of Islam, which they thought were not at all times in line with Islamic sources and the essence of Islam – and which did not every time give them the opportunities that the women thought were due to them as women and Muslims.

Of the Albanian women interviewed six said that there were no gender differences in the religious praxis. Three considered that these were minimal. One woman saw differences in religious practices that took place in the mosque, but thought that the practice in the tekke was the same for both genders. One interviewee could not give an answer to the question. Nine women said that there were some differences. These were perceived in the framework of everyday religious praxis, and the women raised issues related to prayer positions (Farah; Aida; Sabah; Mahabba), clothing (Fatima; Sabah; Hawwa; Zainab), menstruation (Hanifa) and childbirth (Zainab), as well as the use of time (Qadr; cf. McGuire 2008, 173; EWIC 2006, 6; Tiilikainen

2010, 213–214) The women also mentioned that genders have slightly different tasks in some Islamic rites of transition, which are examined below. Regulations that may limit Muslim women in some way were often based on Islamic perceptions of sexuality (Akar 2004, 169). A woman is not considered to be unclean during her menstruation or after giving birth, meaning that she should not somehow be avoided or segregated during these periods. She is however ritually impure and cannot fast, pray or go to the mosque. (Akar 2004, 169; Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 16) Fasting days and prayers can be caught up with later on (cf. EWIC 2006, 6). Interpretations concerning the state of impurity may nonetheless vary in different cultural manifestations of Islam.

Regarding prayer, Farah mentioned that women covered their hair and wore loose clothes when they prayed. There were differences in the ways women and men moved their hands during the prayer. Also in the part of the prayer called in Albanian *sexhde* (prostration), when first sitting on the ground and then putting one's forehead against the ground, and then getting up, the women made slightly different movements with their feet than men. (Farah; Mahabba) Sabah talked about the prayer positions as well and stated that a woman had other obligations than a man and explained: 'It's at the movements of the hands [...] the woman puts them at the other place and the man at the other place [...] during the praying' (Sabah). Hawwa said that the genders differed in the way they dressed (Hawwa). Zahra, Nawal and Mahabba stated that being a woman did not affect their religious practice (Zahra; Nawal; Mahabba). Nawal saw however that men and women were different and that 'males have more rights than the females' (Nawal). She claimed that the Muslim society in the Republic of Macedonia predominantly saw the women 'as housewives that they have no right to talk, for example to read something or to say something' (Nawal). Qadr thought that due to the fact that men had in general fewer obligations, for example in the house, they could have more time for themselves that they then dedicated to religion, while women took care of most of the things of everyday life. (Qadr) However Qadr, like Amina, did not perceive differences between the genders in a religious sense (Qadr; Amina). Amina, like five other women, did not either find that there were gender differences in religious praxis (Amina).

Aida could not see that being a woman had an impact on her religious praxis, as she stated: 'Not to me, not at all' (Aida). Like Mahabba, Farah and Sabah she saw the differences as being manifest only in the

way the prayer was done, otherwise everything was the same (Aida). Zainab thought that the religious practices of men and women were almost the same; only some details distinguished them from each other. As an example she mentioned that after giving birth, a woman did not have to do namaz. Zainab considered that this was a benefit for the woman and she liked this religious form of behaviour. (Zainab) The Bektashi women, Wafa and Khadija, brought up the issue that in the mosque there were perceivable differences in religious praxis between the genders, but that in the tekke the situation was different. Bektashi women participated on an equal footing with men in ceremonies and gatherings. This might scandalize some Muslims and lead to speculations and rumours about the goings-on in Bektashi tekkes. (Cf. Elsie 2001, 31; Norton 2001, 175–176)<sup>105</sup> Wafa said that a Muslim woman could take up many active roles, but that:

*Wafa [through an interpreter]: First they have to offer to them [the women] something [...] so they can do something.*

*NR: Hmh, so at the moment they are not having enough?*

*Wafa: No.*

*(Wafa, 31 years old, village dweller)*

Thus, she thought that the current circumstances offered an insufficient framework for the facilitation of women's agency. Amina considered that Islam had a positive influence on her female identity (Amina). Qadr did not see that being a woman would have a role in her religious practice; however she thought that there were differences between men and women at this point (Qadr). Hanifa pointed out, like Zainab, that there were cases when women could not perform something religiously related, such as during menstruation (Hanifa). Zainab considered that religious praxis was more or less the same for men and women and that the differences were small; in general what the man did was what the woman did too. Religiously the genders were the same, as the differences were so modest. Zainab also thought that a Muslim woman could be very influential in her home, in the family and in society and highlighted that particularly in Macedonian society, she could play a very important role through her participation in working life. (Zainab) Farah mentioned that even though men, for physical reasons, were better in doing certain tasks, in the religious framework there were no gender differences (Farah).

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<sup>105</sup> Clayer notes that the woman has to be accepted as *muhib* in order to participate in Bektashi reunions. This status requires that she should be married. (Clayer 1990, 88)

Aida thought that women were the leaders of the family, while the man represented the strong side of the family unit (cf. Dahlgren 2004, 133–135). According to her, the woman led everything within the family, was respected, raised the children and took care of financial issues. The man was the one who brought supplies to the household and decided over certain matters, which Aida did not elaborate in her answer. Aida said that a Muslim man's position as the stronger part was used to accuse and limit the woman, so that the man would lead and decide on everything. (Aida) This was not, according to Aida, related to the faith, 'there are not [differences between the genders] according to the faith, but according to the way that we are living' (Aida). Thus, Aida perceived Islam as an ideal that included, offered and supported gender equality, however this often did not manifest itself in reality due to cultural conventions, which affected religiosities and religious identities.

What the Albanian women's perceptions were regarding Islam and gender articulated mainly two ways of seeing the issues. Firstly, many of the women saw the differences between the genders in a religious sense as non-existent or minimal. However, they were aware of these differences, could name them and described some of them. Secondly, there were opinions that indicated that the Muslim women's position was not so satisfactory and that they did not have sufficient opportunities to do what they wanted in their life. These experiences or observations by of the women seemed to be linked to the local context and way of life, not necessarily only to Islam. That is, the gender identities of the women were of relative importance at least when the women practised their religion, as they had significance for how and if the religious praxis was performed. Islamic perceptions could also affect the way the women dressed and in that way embody their religious identities in the public sphere, a feature that I examine below in more detail.

### **Islam, the Generations and Local Contexts**

*There is no good in a nation where the young do not respect the older, and the older do not have mercy on the younger.  
(From a Hadith text)*

In my interviews I asked the women about their opinions regarding the Islamic religious practice of different generations. Clayer (2001), for instance, suggests that the age of Muslim individuals and the generations to which they belong to in the Republic of Macedonia may play a role in their religious practice as well as in the understandings and interpretations that people have internalized concerning Islam. According to the interviewees, how Islam was perceived and practised depended to some extent on what generation the Muslim belonged to, even though concrete religious practice in itself was mainly considered to be the same. As Hanifa said: 'The basic never changes' (Hanifa). Amina, in a similar vein as Mahabba, Farah and four others, did not see any differences at all between the ways in which the different generations practised religion. Three women found only slight differences and one did not have an opinion about the issue. Nine women thought that there were differences between the generations concerning perceptions, interpretations and knowledge of Islam. Differences in educational backgrounds between the generations were also discussed, as well as the possibilities to use time for and give time to religion.

Regarding the religious praxis of the different generations, twenty-three-year-old Amina stated that: 'It's the same practising, because it's that the same from the beginning and nothing has changed' (Amina). Also, she said that if there were changes, they had only been for the better (Amina). Thirty-one-year-old Wafa considered these changes or differences to be influenced by the upbringing the different generations had received (Wafa). It seemed that younger Amina idealized the unchangeable nature of religious praxis more than Wafa, who could see differences that were related to upbringing. Sixty-year-old Habiba thought that the older people had more time for religion than the young. She also said that the younger generations probably did their religious practice at home. (Habiba) She might mean by this that the young were not so visibly present in the public Islamic spaces of religious practice. Thirty-five-year-old Amala thought that the older people often were closer to religion than the younger. Her view was that how people thought about and positioned themselves towards religion: 'It depends from your age' (Amala). However she did not consider the actual religious praxis between the generations to be any different. (Amala)

Twenty-four-year-old Fatima perceived the aspects related to religious practice, such as praying and fasting as being similar between the generations but, according to her, the young had better mastery

of good Islamic behaviour (Fatima). Twenty-two-year-old Hawwa said that there were small differences between how younger and older generations perceived and understood Islam, but that the case of older generations was unchangeable and it was no longer possible for them to change (Hawwa). Twenty-two-year-old Nuriya stated as well that there were few differences in actual religious praxis between the generations, but that the elder people might have a 'fixed mind from their time' and that they could hold on to the idea that women did not need to be educated. Nuriya thought that the older generations were however mistaken in these considerations, 'because they didn't understand in the right way the Islam and the Qur'an' (Nuriya). Twenty-two-year-old Farah estimated that the young had better opportunities to understand 'the entire concept of Islam' (Farah). She thought that the older generations, during the communist period, had learnt about religion only somewhat superficially (Farah). Thirty-five-year-old Amala also said that due to the increased level of education, new generations were less affected by, for example, TV. Instead they had their own ways of positioning themselves when it came to believing. (Amala)

How the women saw Islam and Islamic praxis in relation to generations seemed to emphasize the similarity at the level of concrete devotional acts, regardless of the generation. The nature of religious practice as something unchangeable could also be idealized. In these interview excerpts ideas that the older generations had more time for religion while the younger generations had better knowledge about Islam tended to surface. The older generations were also seen as unchangeable and still holding on to the idea that the women should not be educated. The impact of the communist period, which would have made the religious identity of the older generations more superficial, was also mentioned. Particularly the younger women, who represented the majority of interviewees cited above, seemed to have an awareness of some differences and could construct their identities as Muslims in relation to their perceptions of the older generation's ways and interpretations of being a Muslim.

Of the women, sixty-year-old Habiba remarked that her faith had grown over the years (Habiba). By contrast, fifty-nine-year-old Zahra thought that the space she had dedicated to religion had always remained somewhat the same (Zahra). Fifty-three-year-old Khadija considered that she had not known very much about Islam before and she had only followed the example of others: 'How the others were saying, I was going that way, but now I found my way' (Khadija). This

decision of faith was, she said, inspired by Baba Mondî and another person close to him. Khadija was not very satisfied that she had found truth only later in her life:

*Khadija [through an interpreter]: I am very very sad and angry, why I didn't know the truth [...] of Islam since I was [a] child [...] so I learned very late.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Khadija: Because she [Khadija] [...] comes from a real Sunni family. (Khadija 53 years old, village dweller)*

Khadija's identification with the Bektashi path and the Muslim identity was emphatic and in this excerpt she distanced herself even from her Sunni family background. Khadija mentioned furthermore that there were no differences in the religious practice between the generations in the Bektashi path. (Khadija) On the issue of the generations and Islam thirty-nine-year-old Sunnite Sabah thought that children would learn more about Islam during the course of their lives, but did not consider that there would be differences between the religious practices of different generations (Sabah). Twenty-five-year-old Zainab had the impression that the older generations often knew less about Islam and had educationally different backgrounds than the younger ones. According to her, this had an impact on how religion was practised, even though religion in itself was the same. As an example Zainab mentioned 'young people when they do namaz, they do it in Arabic, but they know what they are saying, they learned [it] in their own language too [...] old people they just do it, and they don't know what [they] are saying'. She wished for a change so that if possible, older people would understand Islam better. (Zainab) Twenty-five-year-old Aisha also emphasized that the differences in perceptions of Islam were related to the different educations received by the different generations. Previously, people had had few opportunities to gain knowledge about Islam and how to practise it. This, she said, also marked other aspects of education. Due to the increased availability of education, the young could understand Islam in a wider context. (Aisha)



Twenty-seven-year-old Qadr reflected upon changes in religiosity through the generations of her own family. She said that her grandfather had always prayed five times a day, but that her father did not do the same. (Qadr) Thirty-five-year-old Nawal thought that people should maintain their way of behaving to be similar to the way they had behaved in their youth. As an example she spoke of her father-in-law who had had an extensive career working abroad, whereafter he had returned to the Republic of Macedonia. Once retired, he had started to pray five times a day, something that he had not done during his working years. He was even trying to convince his son to function in the same manner. The son, however, had a job in which he could not leave the work place suddenly in order to pray, so this influenced how he received the recommendations of his father. (Nawal) Nawal did not appreciate this change in the father-in-law's religious manners and concluded: 'I think there is going to need lots of time to change these things [smiles] here' (Nawal).

Thirty-year-old Aida also noticed differences in the practice of Islam between the generations. From her point of view the development was going in a negative direction and religiosity was becoming more extreme, even among some people from the older generations. As examples Aida mentioned some ways of behaving, such as avoiding drinking Coca Cola, because if you read the text on the can with the help of a mirror it was supposed to declare that 'there is no God'. Also, people might avoid taking loans from the bank, because it was considered a sin<sup>106</sup> and wear clothing that was clearly more associated with Islam. Also one might not shake hands with people on all occasions and men and women could be separated from each other at organized events and other occasions. Aida could not regard this kind of behaviour as an intellectual choice. Instead she liked the way others among the older generations were observing their religion, when for instance they prayed five times a day. Aida said furthermore that some imams in the mosques taught these more extreme ways of behaving, which she found difficult to approve of. (Aida)

In these excerpts the Albanian women describe in more detail how Islamic religiosity might be shaped by virtue of belonging to different generations. The women saw the importance of being educated to be related to how Islam was practised and perceived. Islamic knowledge was considered to have more depth among the young. Some women

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<sup>106</sup> This can be related to questions of paying or demanding interest for loaned money.

illustrated the ideas and differences in the manifestations of religious identities through their own experiences in their families. Older generations seemed to practise Islam more. This feature of religious practise, however, might also have transformed over the years and could have become more emphasized later in life. Some of the women distanced themselves from this transformation as they did not like the things being imposed on them, specifically, practising religion more in everyday life or being more extreme about some matters. However, despite the more generalized perspectives, some of the older informants had different views concerning the development of their own religiosity. One considered that her faith had grown with the years, another that her own personal knowledge regarding Islam had become more accurate and the third one perceived the meaning and position of religion as something unchanged through out her life. All in all, the religious identities of the older generations were mainly considered as being more concretely practised than those of the younger generations. However, the young tended to be seen as having more depth in their Muslim identity and religious practice due to their knowledge and education.

It is often claimed that urban and rural environments differ in the Republic of Macedonia in significant ways, including religious aspects (cf. for example Brunnbauer 2002; Clayer 2001; Field diary). It can be noted that in the Republic of Macedonia the spaces where the different groups live can be separated or segregated from one another. Duijzings mentions that often more mixed population lives in the cities, whereas villages tend to be ethnically more homogeneous. However, also in the cities the groups can have their 'own' parts of the city. (Cf. Duijzings 2000, 10) Of the women interviewed Amala saw religion manifest itself in different environments in the following manner:

*Amala [through an interpreter]: There are too many, big differences between small cities and the other cities...*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Amala: From villages [...] in small cities, it's more [...] they are more fanatic [...] in religion, in bigger [cities they] are more liberals.*

*(Amala, 35 years old, village dweller)*

Amala lived in a village and worked in the city. She thought that the urban environment had a liberalizing impact on religiosity. From her point of view the differences between the rural and urban environments were great. As she perceived herself as religiously liberal, she probably identified herself more with religiosity, which according to her could be found in the cities, even though she lived in a village.

Clayer's (2001) division of Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia that emphasizes their place of living could explain Amala's view. According to Clayer, elderly people in the villages can express a strong religious identity that manifests itself in the traditional Islamic way of life and it may also have links with the Kanun. (Clayer 2001, 208)

The more strict or extreme Islamic religiosity in the villages could also be a result of the smaller size of the community and its possible lack of contacts, motivated by unease, indifference, incapability or impossibility, with other social spheres. These kinds of contacts could enlarge the space given to more individual interpretations of religious issues. In cases where the village community experienced the outside world or the larger society as a threat, a certain kind of identity withdrawal became possible. This image is supported by Tone Bringa's study in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the rural social environment seemed to be increasingly marked by observance and control from the side of the community, according to her particularly, due to its small scale (cf. Bringa 1995, 75–76). The importance of the local community over the religious community came to the fore in Sabah's reflection, when she reckoned that the mosque community was less important to her than the local community in which she lived. This can demonstrate how the centrality of the regional or the local might surpass the meaning of a religious identity. However, on something of a contradiction, the same woman thought that for her, the most meaningful marker in life was to be a Muslim. (Sabah)

In my material there were also other kinds of opinions regarding Islam in the village environment. Zahra, who lived in a village herself stated: 'I don't think that in this part they are so extremist [...] they are not following completely their religion' (Zahra). Zainab had an opposing view too. According to her in the village she originally came from Islam had a lower status than, for example, in Skopje and people in the village could even claim that people involved in religion were brainwashed. (Zainab) This kind of orientation might, according to Clayer's division, be more typical of the generations that had internalized Islam as an element within their cultural heritage during the communist period. Among these generations Islam remained less practised. However, this orientation, from Clayer's point of view, more often concerns the partly urbanized populations and not the

rural ones. (Clayer 2001, 208) Thiessen argues that even though there might be a gap between rural and urban perceptions of gender relations and differences in expectations regarding different genders in the Republic of Macedonia, currently the urban and rural communities have been brought nearer each other. Thus, today it would be difficult to find an isolated mountain range described in some prior ethnographies from the Balkan area 'where men feud and women procreate'. (Thiessen 2010, 43) That is, differences between the social environments and communities might slip over the imagined borders as described by the Albanian women.

The Albanian women's perceptions of the impact that the local contexts had on the religiosity and religious identities of people tended to represent contradictory ideas. While religiosity could be seen as being more fanatic in a village environment, it could also be perceived as less significant, relatively moderate or even as something that was negatively received. Also, the local everyday context could be experienced as a more important frame of reference than religious belonging. The women cited above had all some kind of an experience of what a village environment was like, but it appeared to them differently, as did the impact it had on people's religious identities and religiosities.

### **Islamic Celebrations**

For all of the Albanian women the Islamic celebrations were of great importance. The women with Sunni backgrounds mentioned particularly the celebration of the two Eids and the Ramazan month. In the Republic of Macedonia Eids are often known by their Albanian names of Turkish origin; Kurban Bajram and Bajram i Ramazanit, or Ramazan Bajram. In addition the women said that they celebrated the Great Nights such as the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, the Islamic New Year, Laylat al-Qadr, Isra and Mi'raj and the Battle of Badr. Some of these Great Nights took place during the month of Ramazan. Women closer to the Bektashi tradition said that they also celebrated Sultan Nevruz<sup>107</sup> and Ashura, of which the latter was part of the

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<sup>107</sup> The celebration of Sultan Nevruz is fixed on the 22nd of March. The date is considered to be the beginning of the spring and also the birthday of Imam 'Ali, the Fourth Caliph and the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law. In relation to Sultan Nevruz, great annual zikrs may be celebrated in those tarikats which have a particular respect for Imam 'Ali. (Clayer 1990, 81)

Matem (cf. Clayer 1990, 81; Norton 2001, 175). Amala, who had a mixed religious background, said that she celebrated four Islamic celebrations: two Sunni and two Bektashi. These celebrations consisted of two Bajrams as well as Sultan Nevruz, Matem and Ashura. (Amala; also Wafa) Habiba thought that the fasting month of Ramazan was not, in contrast with the Bajrams, a celebration as such (Habiba). Seventeen women celebrated Bajram i Ramazanit, which ends the month of Ramazan. This might imply that they also fasted during the month of Ramazan. Only five women spoke about Ramazan as a celebration, but it could be that the number of those who paid particular attention to this religiously significant period and fasted was greater. Kurban Bajram was celebrated by seventeen women and the Great Nights were mentioned by eight of them. Sultan Nevruz was a celebration for two women, alike Matem and Ashura.

The social dimension was a central of most of the Islamic celebrations. Festivities mainly took place within the family among relatives and close friends and often included a shared meal. Sometimes the Qur'an was read or recited, and a dars or a *mevlut* was given. Mevlut was often related to positive life-cycle celebrations. It could be attended by both men and women and was led by a *hodja*. (Bringa 1995, 163 and 170) Shared food or common meals had significance in most of the celebrations the women spoke of. On Kurban Bajram, in case the family had economic possibilities, a sacrifice was done. The meat of the sacrificed animal, often a sheep, was afterwards distributed to the members of the family or to other people in need. For both Bajrams the oriental sweet *baklava* was prepared (Farah; Habiba). As McGuire notes food preparation and eating can also be important spiritual practices or linked to them. Food is often prepared and served by women and can therefore be 'a form of gifting that builds community interrelatedness and reciprocity' (McGuire 2008, 106–107) Farah described the Bajram celebration, which included many food-related elements:

*Farah: Amm what is particular about the the two of Baj Bajrams, the Eids?*

*NR: Yes.*

*Farah: It's that, it it's like a must it's like a tradition to make bakllava.*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Farah: To prepare those [...] and sweets that is, it's [a] must [...], must have the sweets you know, and any any kind of candies sweets and cookies and so on [...], and in the morning, when we wake up all the family, we wake up early, everyone prays the morning prayer [...], and there is a special prayer about the Bajram, aa males usually go at mosques and mosques are full [...] and the women stay at home, they pray, they wait for the males to come back, [after] we have the breakfast very rich breakfast [together].*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Farah: Like it's a dinner actually, it's a dinner 'cause you have a lot, plenty of foods that you have prepared at night.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Farah: And eating today [...] 'cause at aa, you won't have a time to eat the dinner, 'cause aa there will come people to visit you.*

*(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

In addition to food and shared meals, Farah's description elaborates also the slightly different roles of men and women in the course of Bajram celebration (Farah). Also Zahra brought this up: 'The men go[...] to the mosque [...] we prepare the big dinner [...] so we eat together then we go to wish to all our families, relatives the good wish, ho holiday [...] that day' (Zahra). Despite these differences celebrating together was important, as well as visiting members of the family, close friends or neighbours in order to wish happy Bajram to other households (e.g. Amala; Hawwa; Zainab; Nawal). Zainab highlighted, in similar vein to Farah, that there was 'no aa Bajram without aa bakllava' (Zainab). Aisha mentioned that in addition to the food, the ambience in the Bajram celebration had its own character; solemn and warm. For Kurban Bajram it was also important to share the meat of an animal that had been sacrificed and ritually cut. (Aisha) This meat should be given to the poor and needy. Aida said that she did not exactly perform the sacrifice, but gave money instead. (Aida)

The month of Ramazan was dedicated to fasting (Aida). Bringa describes the fasting during Ramazan as both an individual position-taking of personal commitment as a believer and an affirmation of Muslim unity and identity. It often includes devotional activities at the mosque, as well as the socializing in people's houses which the Albanian women above spoke about. (Cf. Bringa 1995, 165) Hawwa underlined that during Ramazan the celebration was for the individ-

ual more internal than external. This included *ibadet*, devotional acts, which the person conducted in order to show devotion towards God. (Hawwa) Nawal had made a practical choice regarding the fasting:

*Nawal: When is Ramadan [...] our holy month [...] as they call it, even that I am not keeping the Ramadan [...] because I am at work[...] and I am busy [...] and it's very difficult too handle with this, you should stay aa, not to eat, not to drink water 'til particular hour [...] when the hodja is calling [...] and it's very difficult to achieve that in summer-time, or or when aa the weather is so hot [...] and I am trying to to help at home, make to thee family easier [...] this pray month.*  
(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)

Nawal worked and was often occupied during the month of Ramazan, which is why she chose to place less emphasis on her religious practice and so did not fast. In that way she could help the other family members who observed fast. She appealed also to the hot weather conditions, which complicated the fasting. In this manner, for practical reasons she decided to distance herself from the religious practice and from the expression of her Muslim identity. Her actual motives for this decision might, however, be more nuanced.

The Bajrams were lively celebrations. In addition to visiting relatives, people bought new clothes and gave money to the children (Hawwa; Zainab). Amina mentioned the joyful, happy and celebratory atmosphere, which included expressions of emotions and love, between people (Amina). Aida said that during Bajram people came together, and those who might have argued with each other would be reconciled. Usually the younger would visit the older. (Aida) Mahabba also mentioned visits to people and relatives whom one had not seen for a more extended period. She thought it was important to make other people happy and if possible to share a laugh or a smile. (Mahabba)

Amala explained that on the occasions of Sultan Nevruz and Matem another sweet known as *ashura* was prepared. This speciality was then shared with members of the family and other people. (Amala) The Bektashis also read the *Hadikaja*<sup>108</sup> during the ten days of Matem, which were dedicated to fasting and preceded the celebration of Ashura (Field diary; cf. Norton 2001, 175–176). Matem ended with this feast of Ashura, during which a special dish was eaten 'made of

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<sup>108</sup> *Hadikat-i Su'ada* (1997) is an epic of the 16th century Ottoman poet Fuzûlî that tells the accounts of the prophets (Abiva 2009).

cracked wheat, dried fruit, crushed nuts and cinnamon all cooked together' (Elsie 2001, 31). Khadija celebrated Sultan Nevruz, the birthday of Imam 'Ali, in the tekke. She said that at these celebrations people gathered together, had dinner, sang and made a feast. She concluded by saying that 'everything in that celebration is also for Muhammed and the others [...] all the prophets' (Khadija).

The Great Nights of the Islamic moon calendar, such as Laylat al-Qadr in the month of Ramazan (Farah; Qadr; Amina), the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (Nuriya; Aida) and the Islamic New Year Hijra (Nuriya; Sabah; Qadr; Aida), the Night of Battle of Badr (Hawwa), and the Mi'raj (Hawwa) were mentioned as Islamic celebrations. For the Great Nights households usually prepared homemade *hallvë* (halwa) and *petlla* (a kind of bread fried in oil). Tradition held that inside the house should smell of something cooked or sweet on these occasions. During these nights, friendly relations with neighbours were expressed by sharing the prepared food (cf. McGuire 2008, 106–107). For Laylat al-Qadr, celebrated as the night when the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed, it was also recommended to pray. Sometimes the whole night could be spent in prayer. Because this night occurred in Ramazan it did not include that many festivities, as Muslims fast during the day (Farah; also Aida). Farah explained that during the Laylat al-Qadr:

*Farah: They say that the sky is open and aa thee, how to say, the devil gets [...] chained you know [...] they say all the angels of heaven come down to earth and hear every prayer that you say.  
(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

Also during the other Great Nights it was recommended to pray and make a *dua'*, personal supplication and invocation to God, but in this respect Laylat al-Qadr had special status. For the Prophet's birthday Farah said that many organisations prepared some celebrations and programmes, such as theatre pieces and shows, and something might also be included in the TV programmes. (Farah) Hawwa described the celebration for the Great Nights as taking place at home within each family. It could be that something special was prepared for that night. After midnight there was a call for a voluntary prayer during which the Qur'an was read. (Hawwa)

In addition to the celebration of the two Bajrams, Hanifa mentioned *xhuma* (in Arabic *jum'a*) – the Friday midday prayer – as a religious celebration. She claimed that the core of the celebration was to worship Allah and to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad.



(Hanifa) Regarding women's attendance at this Friday prayer, Wadud notes that according to Islamic law and tradition often only men attend it. However, women have participated in this activity throughout Muslim history. (Wadud 2007, 177) For Zahra, each day was a holiday or a celebration, if everything in her life and in the life of her family members was fine (Zahra). Aida mentioned that during the holidays Muslims would give their part, for example economic support or clothes, to people who were less well off (Aida). Zainab told that in her village Muslims and Christians had celebrated Easter together. She had not however participated in this herself. (Zainab)

Islamic celebrations were important occasions for the women in terms of strengthening and enacting their Muslim identities, and to some extent their female identities too. When gathering together, socializing and sharing meals the Albanian women could experience and find unity in the Muslim community. Islamic celebrations also involve aspects of reconciliation and of remembering family members in different ways while visiting them, making them laugh or giving them some sort of a present. Even other people than family members were given special attention during the Islamic holidays. The women mentioned prayer, fasting, sacrifice, dua', ibadet and reading of the scriptures as ritually important acts. Islamic celebrations and acts related to them could function as manifestations of both individual and collective Muslim identities. Because these included both more personal ways of showing devotion, such as dua', ibadet, fasting and praying, as well as more collective and shared dimensions such as making a sacrifice, praying and reading the scriptures together. In this interaction the Albanian women saw very few features that separated them from the men, only references to the use of prayer space indicated this.

### **Rites of Transition: the Birth of a Child**

Of the Albanian women thirty-five-year-old Amala, who was married and had children, described the birth of a child as an intensely powerful event, which due to its very nature could be perceived as having religious dimensions (Amala). Habiba, who had both children and grandchildren, stated that according to Islam, God sent the child into this life and it was a great joy when families received new members (Habiba; cf. Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 8). Zainab, who was married

but did not have any children yet, said that a child should be regarded as a gift from God and therefore one should take good care of him/her. She also emphasized that no difference was made between a boy and a girl according to Islam, but continued by saying, however, that maybe some women that I had already interviewed might have given a different opinion on this. (Zainab) That is, she probably assumed that for some others the gender of a child might be an issue of preference. Amina, who was unmarried, thought that even though she did not have children yet, she wished to educate possible future children in the spirit of Islam. She believed that education in the Islamic way made people more successful and good. Amina's reflection was based on the first revealed word of the Qur'an, *iqra*, 'read', which she considered to be an encouragement to Muslims to educate themselves. (Amina)

The Islamic practices that follow childbirth were in general respected in the Republic of Macedonia, according to a reference person that I spoke with (Interview 12). Of the women, Zahra described these Islamic rites, which she did not itemize, as simple and thought that the ceremonies related to the birth of a child were modest (Zahra). Aida reflected that when a child was born, s/he was born as a Muslim and once raised and grown-up, s/he would choose what s/he wanted to be and do in his/her life (Aida). After a birth, a ceremony was organized (Zainab). It was recommended to immediately say the call to prayer – the ezan – into the child's right ear, so that the first thing the child would hear would be the name of Allah and the call to prayer (Farah; Nuriya; Hawwa; Amina). This could be done by the doctor or the parents (Hawwa). The giving of the name within seven days from the birth was mentioned as recommendable (Nuriya; Aisha; Hawwa) and the meaning of the name should be beneficial to the child (Amina). Nawal added furthermore that you yourself chose the name for the child, but a hodja was invited to pray on the official occasion of name giving (Nawal; also Qadr). From the Albanian women's perspective the birth of a child attached him/her to the Muslim community and gave to him/her a beneficial, protective identity, particularly through name giving. It was considered beneficial that among the first things the child would hear would be the name of God and a prayer call. Thus, in the women's descriptions Islamic principles were present and linked to the birth. Children were highly appreciated, regardless of their gender, but there were also doubts that not all would share this view.

According to Farah if the child was a boy, a sheep or a goat was sacrificed to thank God for blessing the family with a child (Farah; cf. Dahlgren 2004, 155). Hawwa, for her part, could not say if there was a difference in sacrifices depending on the gender of the child (Hawwa). Qadr added that the sacrifice was conducted sometimes, but not on every occasion (Qadr). Mahabba did not mention any aspect that would alter the sacrifice in relation to the gender of the child; like Qadr she stated that not every family performed the sacrifice (Mahabba). Amina explained that after the ezan had been sung and the name given, the hair of the child was cut and weighed. The weight of the hair was transformed into money or gold and this amount was given to someone in need as a sacrifice. This however was not an obligation for example for people who could not afford performing this. (Amina)

Aisha said that she had participated in mevlut seven days after the birth in the house of close relatives. For this mevlut, people had gathered together, listened to ilahiyas, read the Qur'an and prayed. This was followed by the dars, which was given by a *hafaska*, 'the one that knows Qur'an by heart' (Aisha). Mevlut could be held in union with events celebrating life, for blessing and might be organized for various reasons. In addition to mevluts held in private homes, an annual mevlut might take place at the mosque in relation to the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. The mevlut can have diversified contents marked by local traditions. (Cf. Bringa 1995, 169–170)

Nuriya thought that the family played a significant role in a child's religious education. She said furthermore that: 'When the child is seven, eight years old he or she should try to pray, to do the practice of five prayers' (Nuriya). When growing up, physically as well as spiritually, the child would then become more dedicated to religious observance. (Nuriya) Khadija wished that she could pass on the Bektashi tradition to her children (Khadija), whereas Nawal, by contrast, stated that Islam did not play any kind of role in the way she raised her children; it was rather she and her husband who made the decisions about their upbringing. Nawal considered that a Muslim woman could have many active roles. For example, within her family she could help the family and her husband, work to contribute to the family budget, to be a good mother, to think about other family members and to give them things they need and to ensure that the children received a good education. She thought it was important to teach the children not to hate anyone. Regardless of the religion or nationality of other people, one should be kind and see others firstly as human beings. Nawal said that 'in this direction the the woman can contribute a lot' (Nawal). Be-

ing a mother and educating the children according to Islamic precepts was an important aspect of how a Muslim woman could be active and ensure health and wellbeing of succeeding generations, Mahabba thought. However this was only one of the many roles that she could have. (Mahabba; cf. Sakaranaho 1998, 206)

Being a mother, having children and raising them had a religious dimension for most of the women interviewed. These were also ways for the Muslim woman to express her religious agency, even though it was emphasized that these were not the only roles a Muslim woman might have. The birth of a child could be religiously celebrated through name giving, sacrifices and mevlut. But in the women's narratives it also had an inner dimension in which the Albanian women were thankful to God for the children they had been blessed with. Opportunities to pass the religious tradition on to the children seemed important for the women, but also opinions favourable to more secular ways of raising children were expressed. Thus, the birth of a child could enact the women's religious identities through the Islamic rituals and religious education they wished to provide. It might also be something that touched them at a more personal and private level of religiosity, or made them choose another way of raising children than would be assumed according to religious expectations. That is, the birth of a child and motherhood could function as a certain kind of watershed for the construction of the religious identities of the women.

### **Rites of Transition: Islamic Marriage, Niqah**

For a Muslim marriage is a religious recommendation and women particularly rarely remain unmarried. The Islamic meaning of marriage is often perceived as involving the establishment of a family, raising children as well as the sexuality of the spouses. (Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 14; Hallenberg 2008, 88) Within marriage the roles of men and women could be perceived as complementary to each other, men and women were different, but not unequal (Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 11). Marriage was considered to be a life long commitment, but it could also be dismantled under certain conditions. The Islamic law and how it is implemented varies between the countries. (Hallenberg 2008, 89)

The women said that in the Republic of Macedonia, Islamic wedding ceremonies were conducted in two parts and two places: legally at the

municipal offices to register the act officially, and, if so desired, the marriage was also sealed religiously (Farah; Habiba; Zainab; Hawwa; Khadija; Nawal; Qadr; Aida; Zainab). Hawwa said that of these two the wedding ceremony performed by an imam was more important to Muslims (Hawwa) and Zainab for her part thought that the Islamic marriage was not important for the Macedonian state (Zainab). Khadija considered that there were different options as to how to get married and it depended on 'how is your spirit'. You could choose to go to the municipal office, or to the tekke to see the baba, or have the ceremony done by a hodja. According to Khadija, a Bektashi wedding was a very beautiful ceremony. (Khadija) Farah for her part said that she had never participated in a religious wedding ceremony (Farah). In the traditional Albanian wedding celebration, Mahabba perceived few religious features. The celebrations were often permeated more by cultural than religious traditions. (Mahabba) Amala said that the religious wedding ceremony included bargaining over the amount of money that 'was just [meant] to secure the lady, so in case they divorced, she will get the money to have [it] for the rest of her life'. She however added: 'But now they are not giving the money [...] it's only a tradition'. (Amala) Nonetheless, Qadr said that the custom was still used and that the amount, known in Albanian as *lira*, was often in gold (Qadr). If divorce occurred, this amount was meant to help the woman to establish herself on 'her own feet' (Aida; cf. Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 9–10).

Amina explained that the marriage was made official by the agreement of the two partners involved and their parents, and that in order to reach this point there should exist feelings of love and liking between the couple to be (Amina; cf. Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 10). Aisha said that the parents could only give advice. The final decision was between the persons who were getting married (Aisha; cf. Akar 2004, 168). Zahra however pointed out that 'usually in aa our religion, the parents are involved' (Zahra).<sup>109</sup> Furthermore she considered that the more liberal attitudes towards preserving the family structures in the West had put the woman in a lower position. She thought that the Albanian cultural way of life still respected the family values:

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<sup>109</sup> In the field there were sometimes also references to arranged marriages (cf. EWIC 2007, 33).

Zahra: *They [the women] use to be treated better, when the man was the head of the house [...] when he was bringing the decision and it was not that many divorces [...] and...do you understand?*

NR: *Yes.*

Zahra: *And I was telling to [NN] our man [an Albanian] still have a family value, I I I see in [this other country] divorces four, five, they marry three, four times in their life...*

NR: *Yeah.*

Zahra: *Most of them three times [...] I can say, but our man they will stick with their family.*

*(Zahra, 59 years old, village dweller)*

Zahra had encouraged her children to marry whomever they wanted, but had told her daughters that Albanian men, according to her opinion, would 'stick for better and worse' (Zahra). The experiences of Thiessen's Macedonian Slavic interviewees had similar traits with Zahra's view. When '[p]ressed into the universality of womanhood', the Macedonian women had felt the Western way of liberating the women was actually more like an oppression. Therefore to assume the validity of a kind of a 'universal feminism' based solely on a suppression of patriarchy may be too simplistic approach (Thiessen 2010, 40), when it comes to improving the quality of women's lives and increasing their chances of choosing for themselves within different cultural contexts.

The Islamic marriage ceremony was called *niqah* and it was preceded by an engagement (Amina; Hawwa; Farah). The marriage contract was written on a paper mentioning the names and surnames of the couple. The couple declared that they were not cousins and the amount of dowry was decided. After that, both parties signed the document. (Aida) The religious marriage ceremony was short and simple and it could take place at home or at the mosque (Amina; Zainab), though the latter seemed to be a rarer option. Zainab however explained that it had become more popular lately in Skopje, whilst in her home village the ceremony was more often organized at home. (Zainab) Zainab said that there were regional differences in the ceremonies and that each city had different marriage traditions. She added also that: 'They [the traditions] are old things, maybe sometimes they are not [...] in right with [...] the Islam [...] but aa [...] people do that' (Zainab).

Hawwa mentioned that her cousin had had an Islamic wedding celebration and this manifested itself for example in the way the bride had her hair covered with a *turban* and in the absence of loud music.

Instead of this some ilahiyas could be performed and a hafaska could give a dars on that occasion. This was, according to Hawwa, beneficial as: 'It's a good to be mentioned the name of God in that, such a place' (Hawwa). The music chosen for the occasion could therefore indicate if the marriage was a more culturally traditional one or one more inclined towards religion. In the first case traditional instruments were used; in a more Islamic celebration, nasheeds were sung. Inviting guests and celebrating together was an important part of marriage ceremony and the festive meals often took place in a restaurant. (Amina)

Zainab portrayed the wedding ceremonies in a detailed manner and started by describing how the groom came with his family to take the bride from her house to his. The groom's family danced on this occasion while the family of the bride was mourning her departure. In the evening, after the marriage ceremony, people from both families gathered together to enjoy a common meal. (Zainab; also Mahabba) The following morning the bride dressed in traditional clothing and danced and sang with the other women. The theme of the songs was the beauty of the bride. In the evening of the next day there was a smaller dinner gathering for the closest members of the family. For this occasion, the bride's mother-in-law prepared three pieces of bread and hid a coin into one of them for the family members to try to find it. (Zainab) To increase the blessings of success and nourishment of the married couple, two breads could be placed under the arms of the bride according to a tradition that Amala described. She mentioned also a tradition according to which the bride when eating would hold a baby boy in order to improve the chance that her first born would be a boy, 'because for Albanians it's very important to be a son' (Amala; cf. Dahlgren 2004, 155). According to Islamic precepts, this could be interpreted as a woman's 'duty' to give birth to sons, which then would pass on the father's name, fortune and religion to future generations (cf. Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 8; Hallenberg 2008, 86). In the Albanian community this could also be a trace of other patriarchal values. Ceremonies related to marriage ended when the husband and wife were left alone in a room, the door was closed and the imam said a prayer outside (Amala). Zainab said that in earlier times the number of wedding traditions had been more important, but now only a few were still in use (Zainab).

Muslim weddings in the Republic of Macedonia seemed to be more culturally than religiously emphasized events. The features they included were not necessarily following Islamic ideals, but were more

impregnated by local customs, even though these latter mentioned seemed to be losing their importance and variety. However, some Islamic traditions such as the dowry and engagement were mentioned by the women. Getting married in an Islamic way was most certainly a positive enactment of a religious and a cultural identity, as one had the choice of being married only in a secular way at the municipal offices. One could also choose whether one wanted to have the wedding ceremony conducted by a hodja or a baba. This was a feature that illustrated the diversity of the Islamic field in the Republic of Macedonia and the different Muslim identities it consisted of. As with the rites of transition related to the birth of a child, the wedding ceremony was described as simple, but connected to many festivities, shared meals and traditions. There were regional differences in how the marriages were celebrated and opportunities to organize more religiously inclined wedding ceremonies and festivities. In these, Islamic features became visible in the clothing, programme and the music chosen.

#### **Rites of Transition: Islamic Funeral, Xhenaze**

The Albanian women said that men and women had somewhat separate tasks in religious funeral services (Farah; Qadr; Mahabba). Some of the women, such as Amina, had never participated in a funeral (Amina). Sabah did not mention anything related to Islamic funeral services in her interview – and the wedding ceremony seemed unknown to her too (Sabah). The Islamic funeral ceremony was called in Albanian *xhenaze* (Amina; Hawwa). When someone passed away, it was important not to leave the dead person alone. The Qur'an was read on this occasion and prayers were made. In prayers requests to God for forgiving the deceased were expressed, so that s/he could see paradise. (Hawwa) Amina reflected on the possibility that there would be no family members left to take care of the deceased: 'I am sure that there [...] [is] no Muslim that has a heart to leave it [the body] like that, on the street or somewhere' (Amina). Thus, the funeral would be arranged, if not by the closest family, by somebody. Amina also knew that the cemeteries in Skopje were already very full. In her village the council of the mosque took care of the cemetery and did not, according to her, receive any remuneration for this. (Amina)

Farah explained that the first thing done in the funeral preparations was to make a wudu (a ritual wash; generally the more comprehensive ablution used for washing the deceased is known as *ghusl*) for the body. From a woman's perspective, in the case where the dead



one was her mother, she may carry out this ritual wash. If she was incapable of doing it herself, other women would take care of the procedure. If no such a woman was available who would know how to do this, the imam or somebody else would take care of it. It was recommendable that the husband did the washing of his wife's body and *vice versa*. (Farah; Amina; Hawwa) Hawwa added that the body was covered with a white sheet during the washing (Hawwa; cf. Haltenberg 2008, 83). Aida mentioned that during the wash, each part of the body had to be touched. This was, according to her, something that older people stressed: all those parts of the body which had been touched, would be saved from burning in hell. However, the central idea was that the body was cleaned before it was buried. If there was blood on the body, it had to be removed. The body was wrapped up and dressed in a simple white cloth, called in Albanian *çefejn*, which covered it entirely; only the face was left visible. (Amina; Aida; Hawwa; Qadr).

While the body was wrapped in the cloth, the Qur'an was read nearby (Farah). The mouth was closed so that insects could not get in. If scented water, which people had brought from their pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, was available, it could be poured on the cloth, so that insects would keep off the body. Aida underlined that it was important that the body was buried only after it was purified and covered with clean things. The body was buried in a white shroud and above it was placed a wooden shield so that the sand and soil would not touch the body directly. (Aida) Only men went to the cemetery and they carried the body there in a coffin. Having arrived at the place of burial, the body wrapped only in a white cloth was laid down into the ground. (Amala; Amina; Farah; Hawwa; Qadr; Mahabba; Zainab) Farah explained this custom:

*Farah: At the funerals where only men goes, it's not that it's not allowed females to go, but for these aa, for the benefit of the dead one so, could, 'cause the the female can burst and cry and [...] in our religion that is not good for the dead one [...] 'cause he [the deceased] hears and it's like you are grieving for his soul.  
(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

The absence of women is explained here as being due to their tendency to be unable to control their emotions in the time of grief. This is believed not to benefit the dead one, as s/he has left this world in order to meet with his/her Creator. That is, one should not be sad for what has happened. However, Farah mentioned also that women were not prohibited from attending, but that in the current circum-

stances it was not the common practice. Nuriya also brought up that it was characteristic for men only to bury the body (Nuriya). Qadr maintained that women were not allowed to go to the graveyard, where the body was buried by the men (Qadr). The ceremony that took place by the grave to bid farewell to the deceased was known as *tevhid*. Bringa mentions *tevhid* as a formalized ritual for sorrow in which congregational prayers were said for the dead one. In connection to joyous events one primarily held a *mevlut* for a blessing in this life. (Bringa 1995, 187–188) Also *dua'* was made for the deceased (Amina). Nuriya told that the death was announced at the mosque of the village and the *ezan* that called people to prayer would be different from usual. A *xhenaze salat*, funeral prayer, took place and 'they pray those two *reqat* namaz for the dead one' (Nuriya; also Mahabba). After that, people would have the opportunity to see the family who has lost a member and express their condolences (Field diary). Mahabba mentioned that words of farewell were said by the grave and people who had gathered for the funeral could also read the Qur'an (Mahabba). The sunlight had a particular meaning for the burial ceremony: the body should be buried before the sunset (Amala). Amala said that 'if there is [...] no sun or there is no light [...] then they leave the funeral for tomorrow' (Amala). Zainab also remarked that the funeral was taken care of immediately after the person had passed away, even during the same day (Zainab). Habiba said that a *hodja* sang religious hymns when the body was put into the ground (Habiba). Regarding the Bektashi customs, Khadija mentioned that the Bektashi baba, who had passed away, had been buried inside a *tekke*. The funeral ceremonies for the *babas* and *dervishes* took place in the *tekke*; other believers were buried as Muslims in general were. (Khadija)

*It was emphasized that a Muslim's funeral was simple (Aida; Zainab).  
Aida: Because according to the Muslim sayings, it's like, he comes without nothing [...], [the] man, and he has to go without nothing.  
(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Some days after the death, the family might read the entire Qur'an; in this way they performed a *hatme* for the dead one (Farah). After forty days, a *mevlut* could be performed for the deceased, even though *mevlut* speaks of the birth and the life of Prophet Muhammad and was in that sense a contradictory usage. Amala considered that people in the Republic of Macedonia had mixed things up by implementing *mevlut* even in contexts where it did not really belong. (Amala) However, Bringa described similar customs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where a *mevlut* was given forty days after death in order to celebrate the

soul leaving the body (Bringa 1995, 170). Muslims may visit the graves and graveyards whenever they want; Amina said that there were no special days for going there. They do not take anything with them to the grave, but instead they 'say a prayer for all the dead people around', not only for the one whose grave they visit. (Amina)

Of all the Islamic rites of transition which the Albanian women described to me the funeral seemed to be the one where gender identity was more clearly acknowledged. In the tasks of performing the ritual wash and burying the body of the deceased, men and women had separate tasks. According to the women's descriptions the funeral consisted of several stages: prayers made for the person who had passed away, cleaning the body and covering it, burial, ritual prayers and dua' for the dead one, followed later on by a hatme, mevlut and visits to the grave. Even though some of the women had not participated in funerals, all in all their narratives regarding the funeral ceremony were relatively detailed. Despite the prevailing practice that only men would go to bury the body, some of the women mentioned that women were actually not prohibited from participating in this ceremony. Thus, they made a distinction between a more cultural and an Islamic custom. Of these, the Islamic one seemed to offer the women a wider frame of reference and more choices regarding their participation. Similar to the rituals related to the birth of a child and Islamic marriage, also in the Islamic funeral, according to the women's views, cultural and religious identities intertwined and gained a different emphasis. In addition the funeral gave meaning to gender identities and could be perceived as an enactment of the Muslim identity in a society that had predominantly different religious or secular values.

## **The Muslim Way Is Meaningful**

This section firstly looks at what kinds of meanings Islam could have for the Albanian women as well as some of the contexts and ways in which specifically Muslim ways of functioning were manifested as significant factors in the women's lives and impacted on their identities. Secondly, in the following subsection, I examine the impact of Islam on relationships and how social responsibility is addressed by the women, elaborating on the significance these issues had for the women's identity construction.

Of the women Farah reflected extensively on what she thought Islam expected from her. She understood Islamic recommendations or rules

more as being something that served as a guide or principle for the individual. To her, religious expectations were personally and internally motivated, something that one should expect from oneself. She also considered that 'the guide is for you, to be the best [...] the most successful one' (Farah). Hanifa stated as for the decisions related to choices in social questions and everyday life: 'What is hallal [*halal*] and *haram* we respect' (Hanifa). The Hanafi school of law recognizes seven categories of ritual action, which varied from farz to haram. Farz was a practice which was believed to be requested by Sunna and that all the believers must therefore perform. Haram were the things that were forbidden. (Bringa 1995, 160)<sup>110</sup> Habiba saw *edebi* – the Islamic etiquette in Albanian – as meaningful: 'That is good for the religion [...] and for all of us' (Habiba). For Sabah, the morals represented by *edebi* were very important: 'The person that has no moral, it has no soul, no faith, no religion' (Sabah). For Nuriya *edebi* meant to be moral and to have moral values. She said that it was about 'keeping your honour, your honesty, yeah [...] there are others [other aspects in *edebi*] but it is this one that I [...] remember, this comes into my mind' (Nuriya). Mahabba thought that *edebi* defined the boundaries for what was allowed and good behaviour (Mahabba). Zainab remembered that she had tried to read a book about *edebi* and had come to a conclusion that *edebi* was much more than good manners; it was also about rights and respecting others (Zainab).

Even though she did not perceive herself as a very religious person, Amala thought that God could help her with difficult issues and in decision-making. Her perception was that religion could help people know how to abide by limits of what was deemed acceptable. (Amala) Farah compared the Qur'an to a guide, which alongside practical, inherent things, helped the believer to find the correct way of functioning in life. She thought that this also affected her personal choices to some extent. Farah said that for her the three most important concepts related to religion were believing in the oneness of God, having self-consciousness and praying and performing the *dua'* (Farah). For Sabah, Islam was an important focus of interest; it did not however play a role in how she made her personal choices. The most important words or notions related to Sabah's faith were *bismillah* (in the name of God), *shehadet* (confession of faith) and the Qur'an. (Sabah) According to Mahabba, as society did not function according

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<sup>110</sup> Perho lists five of these categories 1) duties, 2) recommendable acts, 3) permissible acts, 4) avoidable acts and 5) forbidden acts (Perho 2004, 75–76).

to religious principles, Islam might have a role to play in social issues if people within society voluntarily followed Islamic precepts. People had a choice about how they wanted to function and live. (Mahabba) In other words, the Muslim identity and way of life could, according to the women, offer moral conviction and beneficial limitations and guidelines, more success in life and help with decision-making. It was also acknowledged that the Islamic way of life had an impact on the surrounding society, as a choice to function in a certain, Islamic, manner and as a way to enact the Muslim identity.

One of the reference persons stated that religious traditions were very visible, if not even dominant, in most of the Muslim families in the Republic of Macedonia. The person continued by saying through an interpreter that:

*The marriages also are been made of with the religious ro rules [...] the divorces even though they are very small number of divorces, but even it sometimes happens, to have some divorce they are also with the with the religious rules [...] and also other things, everyday things.*  
(Interview 12)

Concerning marriage, Habiba saw it as being easier if both partners were Muslims, as they would have the same education. Habiba stated furthermore regarding healthcare that: 'If the doctor is Muslim, I have aa, it's more easier to me to express the problem that I have' (Habiba). In issues related to healthcare, Islamic perceptions strive to separate men and women. From an Islamic point of view, in ideal circumstances, a Muslim preferably should have the right or the possibility to receive treatment and care from a doctor of the same gender. If other people participate in medical consultation, all of them should preferably be of the same gender. (Hajjar 2008, 109) However, the primary concerns in healthcare were reliability, professional skills and ethics, followed by gender. On the contrary, the confession of the medical staff was not of significance, meaning for example that a Christian doctor could treat a Muslim patient. (Hajjar 2008, 110) Farah had a similar view as Habiba on this issue of health care and thought in addition that the gender issue became meaningful in this context:

*Farah: There are those like aa rules that you have to respect [...] for example if you go at the doctor, if there is a female doctor and a male doctor you will go probably at the female doctor [...] when it is about gynaecology or something like that [...] it's [...] more likely to go to female doctor than to at male [...] also, in extreme cases, when there is no female doctor, you will go at the male doctor.  
(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

Wafa, on the contrary, said that religion had very little to do with her decisions regarding health care or other issues related to life in society. Sabah, similar to Wafa, emphasized that in her opinion it was more important for the person to be a doctor, the gender made no difference (Sabah). Zainab for her part thought, like Habiba, that she had the feeling of being closer to the Muslims in many aspects of her life in addition to preferably visiting a Muslim doctor:

*Zainab: If I am a Muslim, I want to be with Muslim[...] friends, Muslim husband and that things, because I can, I have so much in common [...] with that people, I can express aa my feeling and my my plans and everything [...] easier and better.  
(Zainab, 25 years old, city dweller)*

Farah also said that religion had a role in what kind of a job a Muslim would choose, as according to her 'religion does such a selection'. Here she was referring to places where there was high alcohol consumption, for example, or some kind of bullying behaviour. Farah saw these as dirty and undesirable elements in a Muslim's workplace. As for studying, Farah emphasized that as a Muslim she had unlimited freedom; one actually had unlimited freedom in everything, but there were rules one needed to respect. (Farah)

I also asked the women interviewed about the possible meaning the Islamic tradition related to *mahram* – male relative through bloodline or marriage – had in their lives. A mahram could be thought of as a kind of guardian and he might accompany a woman when she travelled, for example. Interpretations as to how the tradition was understood however varied. Zainab said that tradition was important to her and she did not consider it as a burden to have a mahram, but on the contrary respected the practice:

*Zainab: Always to be behind me in, when I am travelling or when I have problems or when, or when I want to do something too [...] to achieve something, when, because in Islam...*

*Interpreter: In Islamic law it is aa [...] strictly [defined] [...] when do you need it and when do you not.*

*Zainab: And who can be your mahram and [who] can't.  
(Zainab, 25 years old, city dweller)*

Hanifa had quite similar thoughts when she defined mahram as a person one could not marry and explained that she took this tradition as a privilege (Hanifa). Farah knew that it was recommended that a male relative would accompany women on their trips. She however did not think that the mahram tradition had an impact in her life. Farah also was reminded of an example from the time of the Prophet Muhammad of a woman who travelled by herself on camelback and was not afraid of doing so. (Farah) Aisha considered that mahram meant that a woman would need to be accompanied by her father or brother if she travelled long distances (Aisha). Fatima had familiarized herself with the term recently and in her opinion mahram should be seen in the historical context, when women travelled with someone so that they would not be exposed to risks or threats of any kind. In contemporary circumstances she did not see the point of being accompanied by her brother, for example, but would go by herself or with her friends. (Fatima) Amina was not familiar with the concept, but said concerning travelling that she could travel with a man: 'But it doesn't mean that I cannot travel alone' (Amina).

The manner in which the Albanian women described the dimensions in which Islam became important in their everyday life shows that religion did play a role in many of their everyday contexts, outside the sphere of and space for ordinary religious practice (cf. Ammerman 2007b). Islam as a moral choice very often had an impact on how the women behaved and in this way directed and positioned themselves towards their environment and surrounding social world. However, not all of the women saw that religion was meaningful for the decisions they made in everyday life. Islam and religious identities could nonetheless have significance when the Albanian women got married, chose friends or a doctor, became employed, or travelled. The women also held views, which indicated that they knew of the mahram tradition, for instance, but positioned themselves in relation to it in different ways (cf. Karlsson Minganti 2007, 206). While some of the women perceived the practice of having a mahram as a privilege, some others thought that it should be put in the context of its time, in other words, applying it nowadays should be contextual and was not on all occa-

sions necessary. As one of the reference persons said, the Islamic way of life had a significant role in the Republic of Macedonia and therefore the Albanian women's religiosities and their religious identities had an evident impact on the society, even beyond space that was considered as 'reserved' for religion, as it influenced everyday choices and guided in moral questions.

### **Relationships and Social Responsibility**

Many of the Albanian women found that Islam became manifest in the way they behaved towards others and in the respect they showed towards one another, often particularly in the circle of family but also more generally. Parents were given a particularly important status. Qadr explained the respectful behaviour within the family:

*Qadr: In our religion we learn to respect a very much especially the older mens and [...] and the parents, so in daily life, because I live with my parents you know, and I respect them [...], you know, I will never yell in front of them, we womens even don't smoke cigarette before [in front of] your parents [...] especially before [in front of] your dad [...] so you know, if your dad comes in and, you know, you stand up, like the way how you sit, the way how you...*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Qadr: All these things.*

*(Qadr, 27 years old, village dweller)*

In this excerpt Qadr identified herself to a great extent with the group of women, and explained the respect that was showed to the men of the family and older men in general as something based on Islam. Thus, her behaviour in this particular context would be related to both her identity as a woman and as a Muslim. She did not bring up any issues that would say something about her identity as an Albanian. However, her behaviour was contextually linked and therefore also, at least to some extent, culturally established. It is nonetheless difficult to separate religious and cultural features entirely from each other (cf. Nynäs 2005) and cultural features might colour the image that one had of religion.

In the area of social interactions, the women mentioned that with respect to arguments and disagreements, a Muslim should aim at resolving them. The believer's actions towards others were expected to be correct, good and respectful. Aisha described such behaviour in the following way:



*Aisha [through an interpreter]: When you are a religious person you should keep that in mind that you should not lie, and also [...] you [should] think before you speak or do anything [...] it's obvious and it's visible [in my family relationships] in aa as a believings and the trust that we have to each other and as a family, the sincerity and [...] I could not say most important thing that stops, or not stops, but limits or, it's forbidden the lie and if you don't practice that in your family then you are not religious and you cannot have any kind of good relations between the members of the family.*

*[...]*

*Aisha: [Concerning Islamic ethics, edebi] if there is not, you don't have a ethic of yourself in Islam, like you don't behave good, how can you call yourself a Muslim and if you don't respect yourself, how could you respect the others.*

*(Aisha, 25 years old, city dweller)*

What Aisha said here emphasized the reciprocal influence that respect and sincerity had on human relationships. Being honest was, according to Aisha, so central to being a Muslim that when it did not materialize one could not really call oneself a Muslim or a religious person at all. Being a Muslim and having a Muslim identity implied that one did not lie or deliberately do something without thinking about the consequences. Islam was manifest in Aisha's house, not only in what the family members believed in, but also in the trust and sincerity they showed towards one another. To maintain good relationships within the family was an important principle. Aiming to solve quarrels and seek for reconciliation was discussed in the interview with Farah (Farah). Nuriya also mentioned that Islam manifested in her family relationships in the fact that they never had conflicts at home. With the external world, the relationships were similar: family members did not have conflicts with others. Nuriya said that her family consisted of religious people who practised Islam, prayed five times a day and read the Qur'an. (Nuriya) Islam became visible in Aisha's house also in the way her family functioned 'in peace and in comferty' (Aisha). Hawwa said too that Islam could be perceived in the manner the family members behaved towards each other (Hawwa). And from Khadija's point of view religion improved family relationships (Khadija).

Sabah stated that Islam was visible in the family relationships in a simple way. The family members said bismillah with respect to each other, or pronounced shehadet. Furthermore Sabah mentioned the respect between parents and children and also between husband and wife. (Sabah) Hawwa thought that being a Muslim meant working together as one single body, so that everybody would be taken care of

in a human way. For example, in her family they would help people who had nothing to eat or lived in poverty. (Hawwa) For Zahra, the family and the health of its members, children, grandchildren and her husband, was of utmost significance in her life. In her house there were very few obvious symbols relating to Islam. In this respect she did mention however the glass eye, an amulet that the children had insisted on buying and which had the purpose of protecting one from the evil eye; an envious gaze. (Zahra) Nawal explained that Islam could be perceived in the way her family started the meals by saying bismillah. She was also teaching her children not to eat and talk simultaneously, as during talking you might swallow something that could harm you. She thought also that one of the practices related to Islamic religiosity was paying attention to matters of hygiene. (Nawal) Amina described how Islam manifested in her house:

*Amina [through an interpreter]: When the ezan calls everyone of my family aa raises up and takes an abolition and we pray and it's a aa delightful situation and an ambient, the air [atmosphere] is like that in my family at home, when everyone prays and also the the manner of eating, everyone starts with a bismillah, in the name of God [...] especially during the Ramadan.*

*(Amina, 23 years old, village dweller)*

Islam formed the basis for the household of Amina's family and it could be perceived in the reciprocal respect showed by the family members towards each other. This way of behaving was, according to Amina, written and recommended in the Qur'an. In addition she mentioned the obligations the spouses had towards each other. (Amina) Aida emphasized the respect towards women, promulgated in the Qur'an, as one of the most indispensable things in Islam for her. She felt that it fulfilled her and was a motivation for her to like Islam. Aida spoke also about respect for one's parents, honesty, not harming other people, being clean and close to God. In addition to praying to and thanking God, Islam was manifest in Aida's behaviour towards others: being kind and loving others. She thought this was the most important way in which Islam was visible in her home, and the effects of the religion could also be seen in her family relationships. She said that her whole attitude, which could be perceived in her behaviour and body language, was rooted in her religion. Among the key elements of Aida's faith, in addition to being devoted to, praying to and believing in God, was her behaviour towards others. According to her view, one should avoid harming others regardless of their religious or national belonging and be devoted to one's family, parents and husband. (Aida)

Mahabba stated that Islam and Islamic aspects in her house were relied on, but maybe not practised one hundred per cent. However, faith and conviction defined the relationships between the family members. Mahabba, in a similar vein to Farah, mentioned that if she was angry with someone, according to Islam she was not allowed to remain distant and avoid talking to this person for more than three days. She explained that she should not be preoccupied by what she felt inside, but instead try to work things out. Not everyone in the Muslim community, however, lived according to these religious recommendations and this could sometimes make life harder and preserving the relationships difficult. Mahabba thought furthermore that in her community she saw herself rather as a female believer than an Albanian woman. (Mahabba) This might indicate that Mahabba perceived that her religiosity and Muslim identity made a difference in the community, which she was a part of. Farah mentioned that in addition to the religious expressions of everyday language, Islam was visible in the sincerity of the family members and their avoidance of gossip. If there were conflicts or arguments in the family, there would soon be attempts at reconciliation, whereafter the party which had been mistaken would apologize. (Farah) Zainab explained that Islam was a part of daily life above all in the relationships between parents and children. She said that children should respect their parents and listen to their wishes. Children should speak politely to their parents, not argue or refuse their wishes or requests. Furthermore, they were not allowed to raise their voice against their parents; even when the parents were not Muslims. Zainab said that this had influenced her behaviour a lot: 'After I understood that thing, I am [...] most kind, kind with my parents [...] I wasn't before that [...] so, so kind [...] and so after that I am different [...] especially with my parents' (Zainab).

The women's role in the religious upbringing and education of children was discussed several times in the interviews (e.g. Amala; Hawwa; Qadr; Hanifa; Zahra; Sabah). Hanifa, for instance, thought that Islam had a lot of general significance as she stated: 'Every thing is according to the holy Quran true and we practise in our lives' (Hanifa). Being a good mother was one of the active roles available to a Muslim woman according to her view. (Hanifa) Sabah said that Islam could offer support to the children so that their parents would choose the best education for them (Sabah). Zahra wished that religion would be more integral to the upbringing of her children (Zahra). Was the woman's role as a parent and provider of religious education perhaps different from that of a man, was a question that remained difficult to answer based on the content of my interviews. However the questions

related to children's education, including religious ones, seemed to be important for the women.

Amala for her part considered that in her family the children were not very much exposed to religious influences from her side, even though she inherently answered the questions her children asked her, also regarding religion (Amala). Qadr thought that these questions related to the upbringing of the children were also linked to how religion in general was understood. She said that she herself applied the positive aspects of Islam in the upbringing of her daughter. Qadr encouraged her daughter to study, to go further, not to do harm and to make good decisions in life and concluded: 'All the things are in in [the] Qur'an' (Qadr). Hawwa thought that religion had a special role in the education of children. In her view how parents addressed themselves to the child and how the child then would behave was important. She also considered that parents should make children aware of religious matters, such as 'who we are, why we came here and who is our Creator and remind him [the child] for the praying and practising the religion' (Hawwa). Hawwa mentioned that hurting a child for the purposes of upbringing was forbidden in Islam. However if the child had gone beyond the limits there were certain contexts in which the Prophet Muhammad had approved of slapping the child in order to show where the limits were, but this also did not mean hurting the child. (Hawwa) Aida reflected on the issue and thought that she raised her children the best she could, adapting the surrounding societal framework. She wanted to transmit to her child the religious education that she had received from her own parents, as she considered this to be the best one. Aida also did not want to raise the child to be something that s/he was not. (Aida)

Wafa described how Islam could be perceived in her house as follows: 'You can see how we are doing [...] from the books, from the people that are coming [...] from the discussions that we have' (Wafa). Habiba also said that Islam made a positive impression in her home, as the family aimed at following the basic Islamic regulations and recommendations. She also mentioned that her family read religious literature that was available in Albanian. (Habiba) Wafa stated that a part of her religious praxis was supporting the poor and orphans, as the Republic of Macedonia as a state did not arrange this kind of financial support for these people (Wafa). Habiba noted too that helping others was one of her significant personal choices, which was linked to religion and followed Islamic regulations. She brought up the importance of helping, for example, the poor, sick, handicapped and

young people through giving psychological and financial support. She considered that her religious conviction strengthened the human spirit in general and was of value for human life. (Habiba) Fatima was also concerned about young people and wished that they could be helped when facing difficulties in life. For this purpose she thought some organizations could do charity work in the Republic of Macedonia. (Fatima)

The Islamic lifestyle was also manifested in the different kinds of religious expressions used by the women in their everyday vocabulary. Farah, for instance, stated when describing religiosity within her family: 'Aa greetings with *salam* [peace], *salam aleykum* [peace be upon you], it's aa when we close the door, when we eat, everything we start with *bismillah* [in the name of God]' (Farah). Also Sabah and Zahra mentioned how they depended on God's help in conducting their tasks in everyday life and used religious expressions for this purpose. Sabah explained her experience by saying that: 'She [Sabah] says, when she starts the day with the *bismillah*, with God's help, when she wake up with *bismillah*, when she does aa bread or something like that, cooks with *bismillah* and so on' (Sabah). Zahra mentioned that: 'Whatever I do, I start with God [...] when I get up I mention the God [...] the God's help, when I, whatever work I do, I begin with God' (Zahra). Thus, mentioning of God's name was important and desirable also in other contexts than in the course of rites of transition (cf. Hawwa).

What the Albanian women said here about Islam and its visibility in their lives sketched an image that seemed to deepen what they had already spoken of and which was dealt with in the previous section. Islam had an effect, in addition to social behaviour in general, on relationships with other people and on the respect that was shown within families towards parents by the children and by the spouses to each other. It could also be a feature in the upbringing of the children and their education, a dimension the women often said was positive or desirable. It was explained that the meaning of Islam had its roots in the Qur'an, but how it was practised depended on how Islam in general was understood. The Albanian women said that Islam was meaningful and motivated a harmonious co-existence, which sought reconciliation and to help others, especially those who were in

weaker position, for instance the young people, the poor, the handicapped and orphans. Islam also surfaced in everyday language as the women routinely used Islamic expressions. Often these expressed the women's gratitude to God or were a wish for God's support in all of their everyday tasks. Some of the women remarked that Islam was prominent in the literature they read or had at home and also people who visited the women's houses could detect something about their religious identities. Being a mother was only one of the roles which the Albanian women considered a Muslim woman could take up. Thus, Islam and the women's Muslim identities permeated their lives in many ways. Some of the women distanced themselves from what was understood as being Islamic or from an Islamic ideal, but for all of them Islam had some kind of meaning in their lives and this could show itself in a variety of ways in the social sphere and in interaction with others.

## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have discussed the Islamic dimensions that could be situated at the level of interaction, mainly within the Albanian and Muslim communities, but also to some extent more generally within Macedonian society and also to contexts where all these overlap and intertwine. First, I have looked in greater detail at the increasing Islamic plurality in the Republic of Macedonia and what kinds of repercussions this might possibly have had on the ways the women constructed their identities. Secondly, the different ways and contexts in which the Islamic religiosities became both shared and divided were elaborated through themes such as gender, generations, local contexts, Islamic celebrations and rites of transition, as they were brought up in the interviews. I also observed what these interactional contexts, and the ways in which the Albanian women spoke about them might indicate about the identity construction of the women. Third, the focus was put on the Muslim way of life of the women interviewed and how it was manifested in the individual choices that the women made in their everyday life and relationships, and what these choices meant for the women's identities.

Certain aspects of increasing Islamic plurality seemed to evoke reactions and emotions among the Albanian women interviewed. There were perceivable signs of negative experiences, stereotypes and suspicion between the three Muslim 'communes': the Sunnis, the Bektashis, and the Islamic groups with stricter dogmatic interpreta-

tions. These tensions were most likely related to the majority–minority relations, but extended with the Albanian women’s views on ‘what Islam is about’, how it should be practised and what kinds of values were related to it. These fractures, in addition to the tensions between the Macedonians and Albanians, Christians and Muslims, rendered the interplay, which moulded the whole society, very multifaceted in the Republic of Macedonia. The various trends and strands of wider Islamic world that could affect women’s Muslim identities and for instance their more reformist views on Islam and Islamic way of life which were a part of the interview material could be interpreted as such. In the material there could, however, be detected also more liberal, moderate and secular ways of positioning oneself towards religion. That is, the prevailing trends embodied diversity.

The women occasionally considered the stricter Islamic groups as really not knowing what Islam signified and how it should be lived and practised. This might indicate firstly that the women did not belong to these groups, or secondly that their views were based on some kind of reformist influences, which could offer a more precise picture of what Islam and the Islamic way of life really consisted of. Thirdly, the women’s opinions might be founded on an understanding of Islam that was different from that of the stricter groups, or fourthly, these opinions might be formed at a more individual level and were therefore based on more personal, liberal or secular views of what Islam was about. However, the women’s views regarding other Muslim groups were marked by both acceptance and important distance taking. How the Albanian women perceived the field of Islamic organizations and publications could be connected to the ‘Albanization’ of Muslim identities in the Republic of Macedonia, but it could also be a relatively inherent development within Islamic community, as the majority of the Muslims were Albanians. The women mentioned that other linguistic groups had access at least to some Islamic publications and organizational activities in their language. Regarding the Islamic organizations it could be observed that these might function as contexts in which the gender identity of the Muslim women was given more emphasis, due to a tendency to create women’s sections within them, which could be signs of strivings to gender segregation.

In the second section I elaborated on the Albanian women’s more practical and everyday ways of living Islam in interactional contexts, such as in relation to gender, generations and local contexts, as well as Islamic celebrations and rites of transition. Most of the forms of religious expression described that were related to the Albanian women’s

(and to some extent men's) religious praxis followed the mainstream, in the Macedonian context the Hanafi Sunni, Islamic tradition; some of them were more impregnated by local customs than others (e.g. marriage). Furthermore the women described features which belonged to the Bektashi tradition or were inspired by the Shi'ite (e.g. Ashura) or Turkish influences (e.g. mevlut), or linked to the presence of stricter Islamic interpretations (e.g. views regarding the mahram tradition). Regarding this relationship between religious and cultural backgrounds, Hanifa stated that they did in some cases support each other 'but in some others no[t]' (Hanifa). Sabah and Nawal on the other hand considered that their cultural and religious backgrounds underpinned one another (Nawal; Sabah). For Nuriya this connection was clear as she said: 'If I am not religious, I don't have a culture' (Nuriya). Amina considered that Islam had given her an Islamic culture (Amina) and Aida perceived that in her family: 'Faith helps my culture and my culture helps my faith' (Aida). Thus, the women interviewed perceived here a bond between culture and religion in the sense that they were components that were completely or at least partly overlapping (cf. Duijzings 2000, 19). However, Qadr, for example, saw Islam more as separate from the Albanian cultural tradition, whereas for Farah Islam functioned as a wider framework within which cultural and historical perspectives could be placed (see Chapter One).

The rites of transition and the Islamic celebrations that the women described in detail in the interviews could function as more stable manifestations of Islamic religious identity, as they often followed a certain form and were tied to certain events or Islamic calendar. They were also significant points at which religious identity was enacted, as the religious traditions attached the women to Islam and also to their cultural and religious communities (cf. McGuire 2008, 13). All of the Albanian women participated in some of the Islamic celebrations. The celebrations and rites of transition were moments that were predominantly celebrated in a Muslim (and Albanian) context, and the wider societal frame of reference was mainly present so that it gave the freedom to practice one's religion. In the Albanian and Muslim contexts, gender identity could have a more important role in defining the roles the women took, as the Albanian and Muslim identities were in a sense 'shared' by the whole community. However, the descriptions of Islamic religiosity in the women's narratives gave very few indications regarding the meaningfulness of gender in framework of religious praxis. The roles of men and women differed slightly in the course of the rites of transition and in the Islamic celebrations, but this



was often not particularly emphasized in the way the Albanian women expressed themselves in the interviews.

The rural and urban environments of the Republic of Macedonia were often described as being very different from each other. However, the way in which the Albanian women spoke about them drew a relatively contradictory picture. There were opinions both for and against the 'religious backwardness' of the villages. That is, in different geographical locations religious identities were moving across the borders of division between urban and rural, and appearing differently to different observers. Also, the older generations in the Republic of Macedonia were often considered as more religious or more inclined towards religion than the younger ones. However, the Albanian women stated that even though the older generations might practise religion more and had more time for it, they might not have very much actual knowledge about it and they might be uninterested in learning more or in applying Islam more appropriately to contemporary circumstances. The younger generations' knowledge of Islam, on the other hand could be deeper and more exact and this probably played a part in their religiosity and religious identities.

The Albanian women reflected extensively on how meaningful the Muslim way was in their lives. As Bringa points out, in different social contexts and environments different dimensions of a person's identity come into play (Bringa 1995, 83) and that was also the case of the women interviewed. Through the household, mainly through their family and probably often as well their neighbourhood, the social space of the informants was most likely predominantly ethnically Albanian and religiously Muslim. For the construction of the women's religious identities, the primary meaning of household and family seemed to defend their significance in women's descriptions. Through the larger community of a village or a city, friendships and general social life, the women entered or created contacts with the social space of the Macedonian state, its multiculturalism and citizenship. Also, the educational system, religious and organizational activities, as well as all kinds of employment, offered options for creating contacts with 'the wider Macedonian society'<sup>111</sup> to the Albanian women (cf. Bringa 1995, 83–84). It could, however, be observed that in the Republic of Macedonia the schooling system was often arranged according to

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<sup>111</sup> I speak here about the situation in the Republic of Macedonia while acknowledging that 'the Albanian sphere' in the whole of the Balkans is extended over the territories of several states.

mother tongue, a feature that could underpin more communitarian identities, as this arrangement might promote the distinctiveness and oppositionality in a more emphatic manner (cf. Roald 2001, 12).

In the Macedonian context the Albanian and Muslim identities were often to an important extent intertwined. However, what kind of combinations they formed with each other depended on the space and emphasis given to both cultural and religious belonging and religious praxis by the individual herself. This could be influenced by family background and education, or be a reflection of contacts and interaction with the surrounding social world. (Cf. Verkuyten 2006, 52) At this level of interaction the juxtaposition and overlap of cultural and religious identities of the Albanian women emerged in the women's narratives when they spoke about Islamic celebrations, the rites of transition, as well as in their descriptions of their own Muslim way of life. It seemed that certain religious duties that were performed in the public sphere, related, for instance, to use of prayer space at the Bajram celebration and to the actual burying of the body at funerals, were more the preserve of men, due to cultural reasons. Also Shi'ite and Turkish influences on religious practices could be perceived as signs of a more culturally established Islam.

Among the rites of transition the Islamic marriage seemed religiously less meaningful than rituals related to birth or death, as it often included more cultural features and fewer religious ones. However, there were opportunities to celebrate weddings in a more religiously oriented way too. In sum, the Muslim identities of the Albanian women became clearly emphasized at these distinct transitions of human life, as well as during Islamic celebrations. The Muslim way of life was of importance to all of the women, at least to some extent, and it often had diverse meaningful social dimensions such as the respect shown to parents, family members or elder men, aims to resolve disagreements, being honest, not gossiping, helping others, bringing up the children and the use of Islamic expressions in everyday speech. Islam could also function as a moral support and as a guideline in making everyday decisions – when one was, for instance, choosing a job or a spouse. Thus, these religiously linked dimensions enacted Islam outside the ordinary religious sphere.

What the women considered as important and religiously meaningful varied. How the Albanian women perceived Islam, their Islamic religiosities and religious identities voiced and made definitive examples of something that Maalouf describes: '[Q]ue l'on exagère trop

souvent l'influence des religions sur le peuple, tandis qu'on néglige, à l'inverse, l'influence des peuples sur les religions' (Maalouf 1998, 83). The women's answers demonstrated this reciprocal influence between people and religion. When questions related to Islam are discussed, it is often overlooked that the religious practices and ideals are always linked to a certain culture, context and time (cf. Maalouf 1998, 88) and enacted by people who create their own interpretations regarding them. The Albanian women's descriptions of Islam in the Republic of Macedonia at the level of interaction demonstrate well the cultural diversity of the women's religious identities and women's multifaceted Islamic religiosities.

In multireligious and multicultural environments, religion could function as an indicator of sameness and difference. In the Macedonian case it seemed that Islam and how it was understood functioned as a watershed even within the Muslim community. Karmela Liebkind points out that the identities of minority groups could be exposed to the pressure of change and this might instigate ambivalent feelings towards one's own group. It is however not self-evident that the minority groups would like to identify or assimilate into the majority groups, a feature which could be observed in the Republic of Macedonia in Islamic groups, but also in other, e.g. ethnic or societal, groups. (Cf. Liebkind 1984, 160 and 162) Islam could function as a source of stability in times of change and the rites and traditions could strengthen one's religious identity. In uncertain and even chaotic societal circumstances, Islam might make it possible to have a feeling of control over the situation. Furthermore Islam could form a counterbalance to one's feeling of inferiority, as it is often considered to represent the last prophecy and one might expect that Islam will lead the believer to success. Islam also potentially offers a practical guide to behaviour and in that way can become a part of the social system or context, linked to a group membership, as the women interviewed described (Cf. Roald 2001, 13).

As for the details women gave about Islam across the generations, it could be claimed that Islam among the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia had in some sense defended its place throughout history. The cultural memory chain might have grown thinner concerning Islamic knowledge, but the chain has nevertheless remained unbroken. I would say that the extent to which the Albanian women knew their religion, its dogmas and the practices related to was significant, regardless of their age or educational background. In a society that had undergone a long period of being exposed to a predominantly atheis-

tic ideology, this phenomenon could be an indication of two features: an unbroken chain of Islamic memory and/or a sign of an important Islamic religious revival. In the current circumstances Islam could also manifest itself as an instrument with which to cut down connections to the past and tradition, and as a willingness for change, for something new and perhaps morally more interesting (cf. Sakaranaho 1998, 203). However, as with any religious tradition it was inevitably at all times linked to the cultural traditions within which it was enacted and the geographical locations where it was practised.

As a cohesive force, Islam could function as a certain tradition-preserving component within the Albanian community, but it also connected Muslims to a wider Islamic past and community and could emphasize the beneficial aspects their living together might have (cf. Hall 1999, 52–53). This relation between both local (Albanian, Islamic) and global (Islamic) could produce new ways of identification between the poles of more particularistic (Albanian) and more universalistic (Islamic) identifications (cf. Hall 1999, 62–64). Religious communities could provide an alternative for the construction of meaning for those who were excluded from or resisting the individualization of identity linked with a life in a wider global network. That is, religious communities could function as a reaction to social trends, as a defensive identity and be culturally constituted, marked by codes of self-identification. (Cf. Frisk 2009) I would not say that the Albanian women were excluded from the individualization of identity, but I would however claim that the collective and social identities were in general in the Republic of Macedonia, giving an important counterbalance to this process of individualization. When applying these thoughts, I could say that for the Muslim Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia, religious belonging might be functioning as a reaction to excessively Westernized social trends and ideals in society, as the defensive identity of a minority group, or as the carrier of a local Albanian cultural tradition and self-identification.

In the identity negotiations which the Albanian women dynamically conducted in interaction with their environment, Islam certainly played a role as the women found that their religious ways of behaving were both challenged and validated by others and the whole surrounding social world. Islam was meaningful to some of the women interviewed in most of their actions and behaviour in the everyday contexts they faced. What kind of self-understanding these processes or moments of interaction, linked to the Islamic religiosity, furthered and internalized is a many-layered question. Most certainly the cur-

rent trend of an increasing Islamic plurality challenged each Muslim in the Republic of Macedonia to weigh what it really meant for one personally to be a Muslim and how did one position oneself in relation to certain central aspects of the Islamic way of life.

## 7 Islamic Ideals and Interpretations

In this chapter the individual level of analysis approaches the more intra-individual or psychological processes and personal characteristics of the Albanian women interviewed and interprets how these are linked to Islam (cf. Liebkind 2010, 19; Verkuyten 2006, 18–19). At this level of analysis, the focus is turned towards more private and personal ways of living Islam. Here I map the understandings that the Albanian women had of what it meant to be a Muslim and discuss the most central elements related to it. I also identify what kinds of influences these could have on the identity construction processes of the women.

In the following sections I firstly discuss aspects related to the Albanian women's more personal views concerning everyday religiosity and their experiences as Muslims within the Albanian community. I also examine the role of family background in relation to the Islamic religiosity, such as it manifested itself in the material. Secondly, I observe the Islamic code of behaviour and clothing, which the women viewed from different angles. I complement these reflections with some details related to any religious role models the women had and their perceptions concerning the life in the Hereafter. Thirdly, I single out the responsibility the women felt in relation to their identities as Muslims, a feature that they had experienced as growing in importance as their knowledge of Islam increased. I also discuss what the notions of faith, gratitude, love and purity, mentioned several times in the interviews, meant to the Albanian women with regard to Islam. Also reflections linked to the image of human being in Islam that the women described are elaborated. The last part of the chapter examines the diversity of interpretations of Islam that could be perceived in the Albanian women's narratives.

This chapter focuses on the more private and personal ways of Islamic living, as described by the Albanian women, and on the importance and emphasis they gave to religion. This level of analysis is based on a smaller textual volume of the interview material, as it was more difficult to filter out the more private and personal issues related to the Islamic religiosity from it. However, signs of these aspects were readily discernible.

## **'My soul is free because I am with God'**

(Amina, 23 years old, village dweller)

Islam indeed seemed to be of importance in their everyday lives for most of the interviewees. Faith was often significant for the Albanian women in their current life situations: eight women mentioned religion or religiously linked aspects when I asked them to reflect on the three most important things in their lives. However, thirteen women brought up the family and various human relationships, as well as taking care of and maintaining these relationships. That is, these relationships seemed to be quantitatively more important to the women than religion. Islam in the women's narratives was nonetheless often linked to different social relationships and these could be the contexts in which Islam was embodied. Health as an important factor was mentioned by seven women. Other meaningful aspects for the interviewees were, for instance, happiness, their economic situation and love. When asked what did they value the most – being a Muslim, being a woman or something else – fourteen of the women answered 'being a Muslim'. Six of them valued the meaningfulness of womanhood. One however felt that being an Albanian was the most crucial aspect of her identity, while two other women gave other answers, such as being happy (some women also answered several things). How the women described what was meaningful to them in their lives indicated particularly the importance of social relationships, religion and health. Of the many aspects their identities as women consisted of, they seemed in their answers to value mainly their Muslim identity followed by their identities as women.

When I asked the women to choose the concepts that would most describe them as religiously involved persons and Muslims, most of them perceived themselves as Muslims (14) and believers (11). These answers were much in line with how Roald and Hajar defined what it meant to be a Muslim, or the stages it consisted of. According to them 'being a Muslim' is a stage in which one is committed to the five pillars of Islam and in that way maybe to the more practical aspects of being religious, while 'being a believer' ascends to the level of belief. (Cf. Hajar 2008, 99; Roald 2001, 19–20) The other answers the Albanian women gave to this question were that they described themselves as spiritual persons (7), religious persons (4), religiously liberals (3), Muslims belonging to the Hanafi school of law (3), searchers of truth (3) and mystics (1). When the women defined how they saw the meaning of Islam as an element in their lives, the dispersion in the answers was more important. Islam was mainly seen as being related to spir-

itual values (9), life values (9) and moral conviction (8). The other important aspects of it were spiritual elements (7), spiritual conviction (7), religious values (5), religious elements (4), convictional or moral values (4), religious conviction (4), existential elements (3), existential values (2) and convictional or moral elements (2). The women could give one or several answers to these two questions or leave them unanswered as well. The answers seemed to speak of an Islam that had a rather all-embracing nature as a moral system, a guide of life, as an aspect related to existential questions and to the spiritual dimension of life. The tables that give a visual representation of these answers can be found in the Appendix V.

As I have discussed in more detail in the previous chapters and as the answers of the women also above show, Islam in the Balkan states was increasingly lived, expressed and interpreted at the individual level (cf. Bougarel and Clayer 2001a, 42). In the societal context in which traditional religious institutions were challenged by the impact of new religious actors and the 'nationalization' of Islam, a process of diversification of religious practice could be perceived (cf. Bougarel 2005, 26). Along with various societal, political, social and economic developments, interest in Islam that was experienced as predominantly increasing within Macedonian society had led to contrasting interpretations and ways of living Islam in the Republic of Macedonia. Efforts to create a more distinct division between Albanian cultural traditions and Islam, for example, in order to enlarge the women's sphere of influence could be discerned. In this sense, Roald's observation that religious and ethnic identities are inherently connected with other social influences and that 'claims to ethnicity, religiosity and gender might become means of expressing frustrations with prevailing cultural norms' could be at least partly affirmed in the interview material (Roald 2001, 9). Often, Islam as a personal choice seemed to inspire and support the spiritual wellbeing of the women as believers, and there were hopes, and nowadays also an increasing number of opportunities, to improve this situation. Islam and a Muslim identity might support the efforts of the Albanian women to aggrandize their own space and in some ways also support their independence in the local context.

The more personal views and perspectives of the Albanian women in regard to Islam and Islamic religiosity were nuanced and related to a range of issues. Aida, for instance, told when reflecting on what were the key elements of her identity that she valued in herself, said that being happy came first, whereafter she valued being a woman and a



Muslim (Aida). In Aida's answer emotion – being happy – was more important than anything else in her life. This priority, in a sense, kind of subordinated the other aspects she mentioned. Zainab for her part said that it was difficult to describe the space Islam had in her everyday life as: 'There are more feelings and aa that stuff what I can't even talk about it' (Zainab). Zainab explained that the feelings she had about religion were not static, but changed according to her moods and sometimes she felt that she needed Islam more. On such occasions she could spend more time praying or doing something else she knew would please God. Zainab explained that her relationship to Islam had changed when she moved from her home village to Skopje about seven years ago. She did not consider that this change had increased her religious practice, or that her new understanding of religion would be motivated by one factor only, but was instead the result of many things.

When Zainab had moved to Skopje she had started her studies at the faculty and got married. She mentioned that since then, as a Muslim she had had to take care of her home and housework, but she did not feel that the marriage had changed her life much. For Zainab Islam had both private and collective dimensions, but the private part was more important. She did not want to elaborate on this as she thought 'it was very complicated' (Zainab). Zainab was aware that her religious identity had become more pronounced after she had left her village to study, settled in the city and got married. How she expressed her religiosity and engaged with Islam seemed to be deeply linked to her emotions and changed in different contexts. It could also be that the changes in life had strengthened the link Zainab had to Islam.

The most indispensable and important parts of the faith that the Albanian women elaborated on were most often believing in God, knowing God, and iman. Also behaviour associated with religious praxis was highlighted as well as love and respect. In Amina's view besides believing in God, prayer, fasting, respect for others, love and tolerance were central. Amina emphasized the feeling of faith or religion within one's soul and thought that a personal connection to God made life easier. (Amina). In other words, for Amina, in addition to the freedom mentioned in the title of this subsection, which was embodied in her religiosity, the feeling religion could make emerge in one's soul occupied an important place. To add more emphasis to this personal dimension of religiosity, Amina perceived a personal connection to God as life enhancing in general. Also according to Mahabba, faith helped

in achieving the individual goals one set for oneself. When asked what was the most important aspect of her faith, Mahabba answered:

*Mahabba [through an interpreter]: When you have [...] the strong conviction, faith and belief and you have your self-consciousness, you can do right things and aa, you can make God satisfied by your deeds and actions, and also you can achieve that what you want in your life. (Mahabba, 24 years old, village dweller)*

Mahabba also thought that religion helped the individual to orient him/herself in life. According to her, one could not decide everything for oneself, because within Islam there were instructions and guidance for how things should proceed. (Mahabba; also Farah). For Mahabba Islam seemed to represent an ideal to reach aim at, which directed one in daily life and made success possible.

Sabah thought that being a Muslim gave her very good chances and opportunities within society and that she had a very good position within it (Sabah). Qadr was of the opposite opinion, as she said that being a Muslim did not give her any particular chances in the societal context, but instead rendered the opportunities she did have 'even worse' (Qadr). Here we could assume that Sabah as a housewife was more linked to her local community than Qadr, who worked and was in daily contact with a different community than the Albanian and Muslim one. So Qadr could acknowledge in a wider societal context what it meant to be Muslim. However, it seemed likely, according to Sabah's view, that the Muslim identity in a more local context was approved and gave the individual access to a different set of possibilities.

The Albanian women thought that Islam was a way of life to be recommended, as it improved the quality of life and had the effect of reducing social problems. Islam also supported everyday life in many positive ways and it gave to the believers opportunities to grow and develop as a person. According to some of the interviewees, the expectations that they felt had been placed on them by the Islamic faith were perceived as mitigating and enlightening. Fatima underlined that if these expectations included helping others, according to her experience, such actions satisfied the believer due to the pleasant nature of the task (Fatima). Amina concluded that she gave her all to religion and religion gave her opportunities to develop as a person. Furthermore, she considered that if she were to ignore Islam and Islamic principles in her life, she would lose something. (Amina) In other words, these women perceived their Muslim identities as facilitating their

everyday lives and social contacts, supporting their development as persons, but also being a source of pleasure and contentment in life.

Fatima also said that Islam as an everyday practice and conviction had increased her value within her own community through separating her from the 'others' in a positive sense. According to her, as a Muslim one becomes respected and accepted as a person with a certain culture and religion. Also, religion could in a sense protect women from cultural traditions and mentalities that Fatima had earlier described as having negative features in relation to the Albanian women's lives. (Fatima) Thus, Muslim identity was in Fatima's case valued more highly than the Albanian one. It could help women to protect themselves from cultural norms and positively separate the woman from others. Aisha said also that as a Muslim and a religious person she felt that she was treated with respect within the Macedonian society. According to her experiences, being a religious person gave her a higher position. This meant that people were expecting her to be righteous and sincere. Aisha also said that 'they [the people] are not afraid that she [Aisha] is a Muslim, but but they also, they always know that she [Aisha] will treat them in a good way and and with good words' (Aisha). The response of the social environment towards this kind of behaviour was always positive. (Aisha) Thus, this reaction to Aisha's Muslim identity and agency as well as the expectations that were levelled on her as a Muslim in society were, from Aisha's point of view, very positive.

Amala considered that being a Muslim did not give her a special position in her own community, but neither did it create any obstacles in her life. At the societal level, she thought that Muslims were just like everybody else: that is, they faced the same opportunities and challenges. (Amala) Mahabba elaborated on the same issue:

*Mahabba [through an interpreter]: Aa it's aa she [Mahabba] says that aa it only the position and the placement that the Islam gives to the Muslim female.*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Mahabba: It's like that nobody else can give it to you [...] it's that high position that gives the religion itself [...] even that Islam gives that this kind of placement and aa aa aa position to the female it's not that ev in everyday life that is practised [...] it's not that female today, it has that position.*

*NR: Okay.*

*Mahabba: That it, it should be by religion.*

*(Mahabba, 24 years old, village dweller)*

Despite at least an occasional acknowledgement of the position that Islam gives to Muslim women, Mahabba considered that Albanian women were not at all times given the status that the Islamic precepts accorded them, as Islam was not practised in such a way that would realize this ideal. Mahabba stated furthermore that she was conscious of having more rights than she actually was accorded at the moment. She thought that she should put them into practice so that people around her would understand that she could have them and could use them. Thus, Muslim identity and Albanian identity, or Mahabba's identity as a Macedonian citizen were, in this context, in contradiction with each other.

Hanifa, who was born and lived in the city, differentiated in her description of childhood between traditional ways of living and the way that she had been raised. She considered her family 'happy' and 'with no trauma' and she explained this by her father's high level of education. (Hanifa) Aida mentioned too that her father was highly educated, one of the first Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia to have a higher university degree. Her mother was also highly educated. For Aida, who like Hanifa was born and lived in the city, all aspects of life had an equal importance and none of them, like religion or education, had a higher or more significant position. (Aida) Qadr said that probably her religiosity was inherited from her parents who had provided her with a religious education. She however thought that she had learned more about Islam once she became an adult and had the opportunity to read more and also to think more critically. (Qadr) For Zahra, her mixed religious background had given her faith, even though neither of the religions – Islam and Christianity – were really practised in her family (Zahra). Thus, her religious identity could be closer to what Clayer (2001) calls a pluri-confessional orientation. Hence educational and religious family backgrounds seemed to have

left some traces on the Albanian women's religious heritages and their religious identities. They also influenced the emphasis put on religious aspects and how they were interpreted in the women's lives.

Amala described the importance of her grandmother's religious teachings which were related to the Bektashi tradition. The grandmother had taught her special prayers, which could be used in different contexts. Sometimes Amala had felt relieved by repeating one particular prayer for example three times. Her grandmother had also told Amala about important persons acknowledged by the Bektashi tradition such as all the prophets, Imam 'Ali, Sara and Hawwa [Eve]. Grandmother had sung *nefes* (lit. 'sighs'), when she was not feeling well and had shared of her knowledge regarding the power of the tekkes and the babas that was a part of her Bektashi world view. The attitudes of the grandmother towards other religions could be described as tolerant, something that Amala felt had had an impact on her religiosity:

*Amala [through an interpreter]: She [the grandmother] was telling me how strong and how big power have the babas and tekkes.*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Amala: With [...] with the concrete situations she was telling me exactly that who was one, or ill or sick they went to baba [...] then she [the grandmother] was learning me then whenever is something, to get close cloth [...] and to to to tekke leave there [...] then get that for health, some how to make candles for something else [...] we were going to türbe.*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Amala: Many times with her.*

*Amala [in English]: With her.*

*Amala [through an interpreter]: And they [Amala and her grandmother] held candles.*

*NR: On Fridays?*

*Amala [in English]: Fridays.*

*Amala [through an interpreter]: Fridays and lighting a candle for health [...] for every [...] for everything [telephone rings] that you were needing okay?*

*NR: You grow up...*

*Amala [in English]: With her.*

*NR: With her? Yes.*

*Amala [through an interpreter]: That's why I am religious in this way [...] she [the grandmother] was telling that all Prophets are the same, we are praying to all Prophets [...] she was [...] if you want you go in church and give something, it's also God's house.*

*Amala [in English]: God's house.*

*Amala [through an interpreter]: And she was not making diff dividing between the religions*

*Amala [in English]: Religions.*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Amala [through an interpreter]: That's that's why I am not making, dividing of religions.*

*(Amala, 35 years old, village dweller)*

Amala's way of describing her religiosity corresponds well with Clayer's (2001) ideas of pluriconfessional orientation within Albanian religiosity. According to Clayer, this orientation aims at giving more emphasis to the multi-confessional and tolerant nature of the Albanian population. Also, religious identity tends to take a more secondary role in relation to the national one, something that Amala very clearly stated in her answers.

In this excerpt Amala also describes leaving a piece of cloth in the tekke to be exposed to the beneficial and blessing *baraka* power. Thereafter, the cloth could, for instance, improve the state of health of its

wearer. Another custom related to the Bektashi way, which came up in the interview, was to light candles in the tekke. One could also say prayers while doing so. (Cf. Bringa 1995, 175) In the Bektashi tarikat there was an important cult of evliyas, which included visits to the türbes of highly respected babas and dervishes, where one often searched for a remedy (Clayer 1990, 89). Bringa mentions that the tradition of addressing prayers via a mediator, in this case the baba, could be found all over the Islamic world. There was a great freedom of choice in how one performed these not obligatory devotions to evlijas. (Bringa 1995, 172) People often went to visit their graves, an activity known as *ziyara*, a sort of pilgrimage. Evliyas were often figures who during their lifetimes had been masters within the tarikat, and it was believed that they possessed baraka. This power was believed to stay in the body and in the clothes of the master even after his death. Anyone who believed in the evliya's baraka could make a pilgrimage to the remains of the past master to pray for help in the problems faced in life. It was more often women that realized these rituals and they often did so also on behalf of other family members. (Bringa 1995, 173–174; Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 185; cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2002, 161)

The Albanian women emphasized and expressed Islam differently and gave different emphases to their Muslim identities in their lives. Religion was, however, often mentioned among the most meaningful things, together with the family relationships and health. What the women mainly valued in their identities was, however, their Muslimness. The answers to questions as to how they perceived themselves as religious persons defined them predominantly as Muslims and believers. There was more diversity of expression in the concepts by which the women described Islam as an element in their lives. In the Albanian women's narratives and more personal interpretations Islam could be linked to the emotions, be a facilitator of everyday life, a protector of the woman's position, a part of family inheritance, a source of success and a setter of expectations. How Islam was perceived by the surrounding social world was considered as fulfilling their expectations either very positively or as decreasing the women's chances to realize themselves. The women could see a connection between their own way of being religious and the way their parents or family had been that. However, a certain religious way of living did not necessarily mean that the women would internalize it as a part of their religious identities without reflecting on it and possibly making their own decisions concerning it.

## The Islamic Code and Its Implementations

In this section the Islamic code of behaviour, its implementations and what kinds of roles these might have had in the identity construction of the Albanian women will be discussed. From the Muslim point of view Islam is a religion whose regulations and rules can be considered to permeate all aspects of human life and death. These regulations are often related not only to issues belonging to the core of faith, but also involving a Muslim's everyday life and regulating things such as relations between people, between family members, within the society and state, between states, as well as relations between the human being and God. Moral regulations strive to indicate for a Muslim how to live as a morally responsible individual. (Hajjar 2008, 98) A human being is often expected to start observing Islamic regulations when s/he has reached a certain maturity (Hajjar 2008, 101). Wadud states that even though the Qur'an does not give any promises of a life of ease, 'it does give indications of how to live a life of struggle and surrender in order to achieve peace and beauty here on earth and as a movement toward the Ultimate' (Wadud 2007, 7–8) Thus, religiously motivated concrete actions often have a central place in Islamic religiosity and in this way they are also involved in the construction of a religious identity.

Regional variations are characteristic of Islamic traditions and the theories of Islamic law and the practical aspects of the everyday lives of Muslims have always been to some extent independent in relation to one another (Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 56). Islamic law covers and gives answers to questions that deal, for example, with ritual cleanliness, as well as general moral questions such as dressing, regulations concerning food and the ritual wash before prayer. (Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 163) The believer strives for the life in the Hereafter in both faith and deeds, and deeds are understood to be an essential part of the faith. (Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 158) In Islam, there is no hierarchical, formal body that would make decisions on dogmatic issues (Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 136). Therefore, it is not simple to say what kind of position 'Islam' as an entire religious tradition takes on a certain question; scholars may have varying views (cf. Dahlgren 1999; Hämeen-Anttila 2004b). The space given to dogmatic questions can be considered a



guarantee for a certain flexibility. Responsibilities<sup>112</sup> tend to be more accentuated than the dogma. Despite the important role of orthopraxy, The Islamic worldview is not totally indifferent to the importance of orthodoxy. (Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 108–109) Among the Albanian women, Fatima saw the interdependency between orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the following way:

*Fatima [through an interpreter]: You cannot have a good behaviour, if you don't have a belief or faith.*

*Fatima [herself in English]: Or believing in God without [...]*

*Fatima [through an interpreter]: Without having a good behaviour.*

*Fatima [herself in English]: It can't be like that.*

*(Fatima, 24 years old, village dweller)*

For Fatima faith and good behaviour were inseparably linked to each other. She could not perceive them as detached. In other words, religious conviction and Muslim identity were manifest in behaviour. During my fieldwork, I asked Aisha to characterize good Islamic behaviour, as the women interviewed several times had referred to the concept:

*NR: About the behaviour, these what is the most important thing, how would you describe the good behaviour?*

*Aisha [through an interpreter]: To be soft towards the other one, no[...] matter what kind of religion the other one [is, or] who is the other person, it is the human that is created by God [...] I will mention something that the other one [meaning: somebody else has told me] have told me, like my grandma and grandpa, that if somebody is, [...] behaving bad with you, you behave good with him because your good behaviour will make him change.*

*(Aisha, 25 years old, city dweller)*

For Aisha good behaviour was intimately related to how a Muslim behaved towards the others, regardless of their religious belonging, because God created all human beings. Also, with your good behavior you could show an example to others or encourage them otherwise

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<sup>112</sup> Regarding responsibilities it can be observed that they refer only to Muslims who are adult and have full rights, both men and women. They are not expected from minors or from those who are in custody. As for Muslims who are in possession of their full rights, the execution of their responsibilities depends on the person's capacity and possibilities. For example if you are sick, you do not have to fast and if your economic resources are not sufficient, you do not have to leave for the pilgrimage. This same principle is followed in questions of ritual cleanliness, if circumstances make it impossible to fulfil them correctly and completely; one can deviate from them. (Hämeen-Anttila 2004a, 108–109)

so that they would change or improve their behaviour. In this the Muslim identity and the actions it implies could be seen as an ideal worth striving for. When I as a non-Muslim observed the Islamic way of living and listened to what the Albanian women told me, I often could not avoid paying attention to the significance of orthopraxy that religious life frequently implied (e.g. Fatima; Aisha; Mahabba; Farah). There could, however, be problems related to the use of the term orthopraxy itself, as there were important differences in how Muslims practised Islam (cf. Bringa 1995, 160). Mahabba explained how she understood orthopraxy in Islam:

*Mahabba [through an interpreter]: As in our faith is that we have a co-dex of behaviour, should this be done, what is allowed and what is not, like thieving or anything else, it's what is forbidden and what is not. (Mahabba, 24 years old, village dweller)*

For Mahabba and several others Islam and being a Muslim included certain ways of behaving that defined what was allowed and accepted and what not. Hawwa for instance mentioned that 'if you just believe and you don't do practice, it has no standing, it's not meaningful' (Hawwa). This meaningfulness of the Islamic precepts, following them and functioning according to them was also highlighted in Hanifa's statement: 'Since religion is a way of life, we respect the rules' (Hanifa). As for the space she gave to Islam in her everyday life, Hanifa thought that 'Allah knows better, I am trying as much [as] I can' (Hanifa). Hanifa expressed herself here in a way that showed her attempts to reach something higher in her way of living as a Muslim was implicitly present and a part of her Muslim identity.

Habiba said that following the Islamic regulations was the most indispensable aspect of her way of living Islam. She was also of the opinion that it would be good if the Qur'an was followed without any changes. (Habiba) As with Hanifa regulations were of central significance for Habiba's religious identity and she thought of the Qur'an and the Qur'anic texts as ideals to strive for. Fatima thought that Islamic practice and behaviour had a positive influence in social life: 'If they were practised there wouldn't be any problems, at least [...] number of problems would decrease' (Fatima). By this she referred to a variety of social issues, conflicts and other things related to human behaviour. (Fatima; cf. Sakaranaho 1998, 208) Amina also said that: 'If I do accord-

ing to my religion, everything will be okay and fine' (Amina). The Albanian women's perceptions regarding orthopraxy, an aspect that was of importance to them, were that it was at the core of the faith, and if implemented orthopraxy could decrease social problems and lead to success. Islamic religious practice and orthopraxy seemed to have their places in the women's lives and behaviour and in their identities as Muslims, despite their slightly different religious backgrounds influenced by mixed religious environments (Habiba), stricter dogmatic views (Hanifa) or more Sunnite worldview (e.g. Amina).

Wafa, who was inspired by Bektashism, thought that religion and a religious upbringing could be ingredients for a good education, but highlighted the importance of the believer's active responsibility: 'I don't believe that if you are hoping from God tomorrow to be something good with not doing yourself' (Wafa). The Muslim scholar Hajjar's view concerning the Islamic understanding of fate underpinned Wafa's opinion. Hajjar states that the Islamic belief in fate does not signify a form of fatalism, but that a Muslim should aim at improving him/herself and the prevailing circumstances, where after s/he should trust in God's help. If one's attempts do not yield the desired results, one should still not lose hope, but instead continue trying without despair. Thus, one should not just passively wait for results. (Hajjar 2008, 99 and 107)

Habiba explained that there were duties and obligations in Islamic religious life which must be observed to live a successful religious life. These duties were mentioned in the Qur'an and Habiba said that she would be satisfied if she managed to fulfil at least half of them. (Habiba) Hanifa said that religious expectations had an impact on her everyday life, as 'the halal is clear and haram [is] [...] also clear' (Hanifa). For Aisha, Islam had a role in making decisions on social issues and she stated that 'my religion, it influences in all my life, like everyday, and it's the one that aaa [en]courages me to do good things for the others' (Aisha). As an example she mentioned the choices she made when voting: as a Muslim she would vote for a person she knew to be more righteous. (Aisha) Islamic aspects and expectations included for Sabah being a good, respected and sincere person, and a believer with exemplary behaviour (Sabah). Nuriya thought that: 'If I am a Muslim, I should pray, I should fast, I should believe in God [...] to help the others' and many other things (Nuriya) and Zainab concluded that 'You have to be devoted [...] if you want to be [a] good [...] Muslim' (Zainab).

For Hawwa religion was closely linked to humanity: she could not conceive of human beings without it. From her point of view religion helped one not only to be a good person, but it enabled one to see oneself more clearly and therefore facilitated self-reflection. Hawwa explained that God had created the human being with a free will 'to choose between right and wrong' (Hawwa). However this choice was not forced or imposed on anyone, as it was based on the free will of the believer. Hawwa said furthermore that Islam had a role in the personal decisions that she made in her life. (Hawwa) Aida, for her part, emphasized that she was a Muslim by her own choice and that it was not something that would have been chosen for her. And she liked being a Muslim. (Aida) For Amina, like Fatima earlier, religious expectations were not experienced as demands but rather as something she was willing and liked to do. This included for example good behaviour and a moral education. (Amina)

Farah, in similar vein to Aisha, stated the following concerning voting in the elections: 'When you are aa educated in that [Islamic/Muslim] way, it's, it's normal it, you to vote for the one that you think is more, in aa, sincere more good person, that it's not corrupted one' (Farah). For Zainab Islamic expectations played a part in how she made her choices in clothing, behaviour and in her interactions with parents. She also thought that she had a duty towards herself in keeping up her relationship with God, who knew everything about her. In this way she wished 'to be the best she can be'. (Zainab) For Hawwa Islam had become more meaningful in her life through practising prayer and reading the Qur'an. She estimated that she dedicated a lot of space to religion in her everyday life. Hawwa underlined that these decisions regarding Islam were her own choices; her parents had not encouraged her to function this way. According to her, these choices had to do with her or with God. She said that once she had found the right path, 'it made me to pray and when my parents saw that [...] they take it positively and were glad that I pray' (Hawwa).

Khadija, who followed the Bektashi path, explained that her religion and religiosity included an important aspect of helping – both in her own house and at the tekke she attended. She wished to visit the tekke more often than she did at the moment. In the tekke she participated in cleaning and cooking and also supported the tekke financially. This giving of alms to the tekke for its maintenance was a part of the religious life of the Bektashis (cf. Clayer 1990, 89). Khadija saw that religion was beneficial for the household and that is why she was ready to give the tarikat of her time and help. She felt that the Bektashi

way of believing had played a role in the development of her faith. Khadija told also that the Bektashi babas could visit the households of the believers. The baba could be invited to have dinner with the family and the meal would begin by putting a small amount of salt into your mouth and saying a prayer. The visit of a baba was considered to be beneficial for the house and to increase its prosperity. Khadija mentioned that the neighbours knew that her family was Bektashi as they had seen the baba visiting them. She emphasized that they did not try to hide these visits, even though the neighbours were Sunnis. For Khadija 'believing in God with heart not only with word' was of central significance in her religious practice (Khadija). This latter statement could be considered as referring to the Sunnis who tended, from the Bektashi point of view, to practise their religiosity with words, but were not really engaged in it at the emotional level. Thus, from Khadija's point of view this emotional involvement in addition to social responsibility, shared tasks in the tekke and visits of the baba, was emphasized within her Muslim identity.

For Nawal, the core of religion was to function in a moral way. She said that she observed up to 10% of her the religious duties and that she was not giving so much space to religion in her everyday life. Nawal thought that she did not have time available to dedicate to religion. Since her teenage years, she could not say that the amount of space that Islam occupied in her life would have changed at all. Praying five times a day, going on the hajj, helping others and not lying or betraying others were important aspects of Nawal's religiosity. She considered the hajj to be as the most important among these. (Nawal) Nawal also thought that one could learn things from religiously educated people even from different religious traditions:

*Nawal: I mean you can take it [the information] [lowers her voice] [...] for something which is positive but something which is negative, even if it belongs to your religion, it's not necessary to be accepted.  
(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)*

Nawal thought that one did not have to accept any of the negative features one's religion might have, but rather think independently and articulate one's Islamic faith in a personal manner. She distanced herself from an Islamic way of functioning or those parts of it, which might have negative repercussions and considered that one could accept things even from outside of one's own religious tradition if they were something positive. Thus, her positioning could be interpreted as being delineated with the occidental orientation Clayer (2001) speaks about. This orientation might have traces of a certain kind of

rejection of or distance-taking from Islam. Nawal's religious identity seemed to have a quality of transcending borders and, as she herself stated, was probably less meaningful to her than the other aspects of her identity.

Qadr thought that religion could be a very important element in life, if it was understood in an appropriate way. For her, religion gave direction in life and had taught her a lot of positive things, such as being honest, and good, and trusting people. All in all, Qadr stated that Islam helped to develop a good moral person with a good character and also 'if you have a moral conviction, you you will know thee value of life' (Qadr). She saw that the aspects related to moral issues were something important that Islam could give to a Muslim woman, something which she then could apply in her own life. Qadr did not feel that her Islamic religious conviction would expose her to some kinds of expectations. (Qadr) For Qadr's Muslim identity the moral impact of Islam seemed to have an extra value. From her point of view a Muslim identity also supported the development of a morally good person with a good character, something that permeated the person's existence as whole.

Amina judged her religiosity to have grown stronger with the years. She said there was a factor that had supported this development, but she did not say more about that. Amina explained that the obligations that she owed Allah made her behave well towards others and everything around her. She explained this by saying that the idea of the life in the Hereafter made her more responsible. Amina said furthermore that in the Qur'an, all the revelations showed how to live your life in the right way and to achieve success in doing so. Amina also highly valued the ethics of Islam – *edebi* – and the morality it included. She thought that the moral aspect actually made people 'sustain in Islam' (Amina). In Amina's description Muslim identity seemed to be reinforced by the religious way of functioning, by its obligations and the fulfillment of them in order to achieve success and attain the life in the Hereafter. However, Amina, like Qadr, elaborated on the moral aspect too and saw it as very valuable indeed, as it ensured that people sustained the Islamic faith instead of choosing something else. Thus, this seemed to be at the core of her Muslim identity.

Aida said that sometimes life was so busy that there was less space for Islam. Hence, religious matters might be left in the background or given less emphasis. For example during Ramazan, her work did not always allow Aida to fast, which she regretted. Due to the length of

her workdays, until nine o'clock in the evening, Aida thought that it was not possible to follow and observe all religious practices during the day. 'But after that [the work], I pray to God and He forgives for what I have done', she said (Aida). Also social life set limits on Aida's religious praxis and she felt that she could not at all times live up to everything that was expected of her. She said that people were given for living as well, not only for God, and that life also had demands that had to be fulfilled. However, Aida, who had received her religious education from her parents, did what she could. She said that sometimes it was enough to say thanks to God only once a day. (Aida) Aida's religious identity was defined from within by the values Islam represented in her life. However, the context she was living in and her social life also moulded her religious identity in the sense that Aida could not at all times practise her religion, even though she wished to do so. Aida's religious identity seemed to be negotiated and articulated according to the demands of everyday life; it gained occasionally more space and occasionally less, but was never entirely meaningless.

Mahabba, who described herself as a Muslim and a believer, thought that Islam had helped her to find orientation in life and had supported her. She said that the three most important things in her life were faith, love and mercy. Islam played a big role in the decisions she took, as she thought that you could not have everything in life as you yourself wanted: some things should be conducted according to Islam. Mahabba said that in her own community she was active in helping others and if they were interested in something that she knew of, she would freely share her knowledge with others. Mahabba observed that the main elements of her faith were a strong conviction and self-consciousness. With the help of these qualities, everything Islam demanded would come easily and one would be able to do the right things, make God satisfied with them and achieve what one wanted in your life. (Mahabba) Farah had a quite similar view; she explained that Islam's rules, principles and recommendations functioned as a guide, which led the person to success in his/her life. It was the choice of the believer, how s/he related to these principles. (Farah) For Farah and Mahabba Islam and having a Muslim identity could function as a concrete guide for success and personal development.

Zainab emphasized that Islam did not stop her from doing things that she wanted to do in her life. However she said that if something was haram – forbidden according to Islam – she would not do it. Zainab explained that Islam manifested itself in her house in the form of certain rules and some other aspects: such as when it was the time for

prayer, she would pray, no matter who was in the house. Otherwise she thought that it would be hard to deduce on the concrete interiors of her house that she was a Muslim. Islam placed, according to Zainab, expectations on her in the terms of clothing, behaviour, interaction with parents and in her relationship with herself. For instance, Zainab mentioned that if she did something bad, even without anyone knowing about it, 'I have to keep my relationship with my God [...] and I know[...] that He know[s] everything about me' (Zainab). She experienced this as an expectation that she placed on herself in a religious sense. (Zainab) Zainab considered it important to mention that Islam did not limit her in her life, but rather she herself chose to respect the Islamic expectations as a part of her Muslim identity. Thus, she did not feel that her Muslim identity as such would inhibit her, but that any limit she observed was due to her own will and choice.

Regarding the notions of piety<sup>113</sup> and devotion in relation to Islamic religiosity, Nawal thought that they always remained in some manner incomplete: 'You cannot be devoted completely to something [...] always there is gaps' (Nawal). Farah also stated that nobody could claim to be pious:

*Farah: It's aa nor the Prophet no one of them have said 'I am piet [pi-ous]' [...] you can never say such a thing, you can never know, did you do it wrong or right [...] you always have to do it better and better, like question yourself.  
(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

Nawal's and Farah's views embedded into their religiosities a view according to which one could not put oneself into a higher position *vis-à-vis* others as complete devotion remained out of reach. Instead one could personally improve the status one had. The highest judgement remained accessible only to God, however, even though human beings might perform different actions in order to follow the path that God had indicated. Farah saw that the highest action of this type was pronouncing that *la ilaha illa llah* (there is no god but God) and putting into action good behaviour that Muslims should continuously show towards other people, as one might never know whom Allah favours:

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<sup>113</sup> The word piety here translates from the Albanian *devotshmëria*, which means both piety and devotion.



*Farah: You might never know who might be the beloved of Allah, [...] it might be somebody that is dirty, but if you get like, aa, say something bad for him [...] like behave bad [...] you have behaved [badly] with somebody that Allah loves.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Farah: Like that, so you should be very careful.*

*(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

According to Hämeen-Anttila the confession of faith that Farah mentioned has the most central place among the Islamic duties in which both heart and body are involved. These duties of the heart are related to faith and those of the body concern a Muslim's behaviour (Hämeen-Anttila 2004b, 51). Of the women, Mahabba regarded devotion as an act of a high standard. For her, a devoted person was honourable and good towards others and towards him/herself. His behaviour and deeds were of the highest level. Mahabba considered that without faith this was not possible to attain. (Mahabba) Thus, the devotion from the women's perspectives could be of a high standard, closely related to faith, have an incomplete or undefined character and function as a stimulus to higher attainment as a Muslim.

In other words, the women interviewed discerned the parameters of being a Muslim and following Islamic recommendations and regulations differently. While many of them wished to aim higher in their devotion to Islam, some considered that adapting their religious identities and practices to everyday life and finding space for them when it was possible was enough of a manifestation for being a Muslim. As religious or religiously linked practices, in addition to general good behaviour towards others, the Albanian women mentioned clothing, prayer, hajj, helping others, emotional involvement, relationships with parents, fasting, reading the Qur'an, visiting the tekke, giving alms, confession of faith, questions related to moral choices and many personal qualities, such as being honest and sincere. All of these embodied the religious Muslim identities of the women.

### **Islam in Albanian Women's Clothing**

In the Republic of Macedonia the visibility of different types of Islamic clothing seemed to have increased on the streets. In general many Muslim women, but not all of them, wanted to show that they were Muslims also through their clothing (cf. Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 184). The Qur'an encourages all Muslims to dress in a decent fashion and this could be interpreted in various ways. For women it was often

understood to mean that they should cover their bodies, arms and legs. The clothing could also be loose and it may conceal the shape of the body. As to covering the head, there was a diversity of interpretations here too, but during the prayer it was a requirement for women. (Hallenberg 2008, 82)

Among the women I interviewed Nuriya was hesitant about wearing the veil, as she was fairly sure that it would subject her to negative judgements by others:

*Nuriya [through an interpreter]: She [Nuriya] says, I would like to put the veil to to wear the veil you know...*

*[Interpreter and interviewee smile.]*

*NR: Hmh and now you cannot do that?*

*Nuriya [herself in English]: You can do not do that? [...]*

*Nuriya [through an interpreter]: What she [Nuriya] speaks for fakultet [Albanian word for faculty] [smiles] [...] she she [Nuriya] can't [...] 'cause if she [Nuriya] goes like that in faculty they'll do problem to her...*

*NR: Okay.*

*Nuriya: It will be a problem for her [Nuriya].*

*NR: Okay.*

*[Interpreter starts to ask the next question.]*

*NR: I would like to know like why would it be a problem [smiles]?*

*Nuriya: [...] She [Nuriya] thinks that the professors will offend something or say something to her insult her in any kind of way.*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Nuriya: And that they will make a problem with her marks.*

*(Nuriya, 22 years old, village dweller)*

In this excerpt Nuriya assumed that displaying one's religious identity through clothing in a mainly non-Muslim environment could have the effect of invoking stereotypes on the person and lead to negative consequences at the university. Some of the other women also assumed that choosing to wear clothing that was commonly associated with Islam could make it harder for them to find employment. Amina and Aida stated that choosing to wear Islamic clothing might present obstacles for women who work in state institutions in the Republic of Macedonia (e.g. Amina; Aida; Zainab). The items of which were clothing associated with Islam could not, however, be considered as monolithic; Islamic dress took the form of a range of nuanced expressions. In the streets one could often see elderly women wearing long coats and headscarves with darker or lighter colours, which were clearly not aimed at drawing attention. Younger women, who were wearing clothes that could 'easily' be taken as Islamic, often chose brighter

colours and created aesthetic combinations in which the colours of the scarf matched with other parts and details of the clothing. In this type of clothing some women wished to cover their body shapes, some might take a freer position on this issue and considered the covering of the parts of the body to be more important than covering their actual shape. (Field diary)

The way the scarf was tied among the younger women often differed from the way elder women wore it, as it followed the shape of the head more closely and was tied around the neck, something which from the local perspective could be described as the Turkish style (in Albanian the expression *allaturka* has referred to Turkish influences) of wearing it. Also, women could choose to wear a long skirt instead of trousers with the aim of enhancing their womanhood and sometimes they might also carry a *tespilh*, the Islamic prayer beads. Both younger and elderly women might also choose not to wear a scarf, but to use clothing considered as 'decent', avoiding for example a *décolleté*, which is too revealing, mini-skirts, shorts or shirts without sleeves, though some Muslim women might also wear such clothing. Thus, my impression was that there was a spectrum of clothing styles, all potentially worn by the Albanian Muslim women. (Field diary; cf. Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 184)

Among the women interviewed only two wore a scarf outside the prayer space. One of them had chosen strictly to follow the style of clothing which could be considered as Islamic. Later on I noticed that two other younger women had started to wear a scarf *allaturka* after I had interviewed them. Often elderly Albanian women, who used a headscarf outside the home, wore a smaller white scarf underneath that covered most of the hair and is called in Albanian a *shamija*. The *shamija* is worn within the circle of the home and among relatives and friends. I did not see any of the women I interviewed wear a *shamija*, but it was of course possible that the ones using the scarf outside their houses used a *shamija* at home. What was common to all of the women was that they wore clothing that fell into the range of definitions of what was considered as culturally, religiously or socially 'accepted' or did not significantly deviate from this. (Field diary) Nawal, who considered herself to be a believer and religiously liberal, nevertheless stated the following concerning the expectations she was exposed to:

*Nawal: It is expected from me to to start praying [smiles] to[...] go covered.*

*NR: Hmh [nodding].*

*Nawal: With shamija as they call it, not to go dressed like this [points at the clothes she is wearing and laughs].*

*NR: Hmh okay [smiles].*

*Nawal: And aa to stay at home, [...] not to work, but I am not such like [...] I would like to change a lots of things...*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Nawal: You know, the women should have more rights*

*NR: For the? Like?*

*Nawal: Like aa, when I'm, I'm I'm giving you an example at my house [a comment in Albanian] if I am driving the car [...] and I am working from eight 'til four in the afternoon [...] my mother-in-law is saying: well you are working so long...*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Nawal [lowers her voice]: Why should people think of that it's not good?*

*NR: Hm.*

*Nawal: I worked 'til that time they should respect me that I'm working 'til that time.*

*NR: Hmh.*

*Nawal: You know, or for example if I wanna go out when I think that I I need to go out and someone is arguing at home, why she is going out, the womens are not going out each time, for example twice a day [...] if you go out at work and come at home you shouldn't go outside [laughs] any more [...]*

*(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)*

This interview excerpt raises some of the issues that might still present difficulties for some Albanian women: leaving the sphere of the household, interactions between men and women, the possible views of family members and their interventions regarding women's clothing and choices related to their religious life. To some extent this might also involve questions related to women's access to education as discussed in the Chapter Five. In these questions, Nawal distanced herself from common practices, as she was not willing to dress according to the prevailing cultural and religious expectations, or to follow religious practice in a certain, prescribed manner. She also considered that women should be able to work and to leave the household as it suited them and their schedules (cf. Dahlgren 2004, 143). In Nawal's description the differences between the generations surfaced, as well as the possible attitudes of her parents-in-law regarding Nawal's religious practice, employment and clothing.

Muslims in general seemed to be engaged in a process of negotiation in many ways, as to their place within Macedonian society. An example of this is the question related to veiling in the ID photos, mentioned above. I would estimate that when it came to Islamic clothing, there has most likely been a change in terms of the reasons for using it. If the use was previously to a great extent dictated by tradition, expectations from the men of the family, or other kinds of social pressures, nowadays it more often seems to be a conscious choice or a calling, at least among the younger generations. Nawal however mentioned that 'my father-in-law, he is [a] very religious man [...] every time I'm, I'm going out, I have to take care what I am dressing [...] 'cause if it's too open, he will argue, why she [is] dressing like that or so and so [smiles]' (Nawal). Thus, older generations could place expectations on the younger ones regarding their clothing and find religious reasons to justify this.

For some Muslims the Islamic scarf may also be a sign or a symbol of a certain kind of 'backwardness'. Aida considered that Islam was expressed in her lifestyle through her way of dealing with others and in her attitudes, not necessarily through a certain kind of clothing. She also had an opinion about Islamic dress, as she considered it to be something that each individual decided on for him/herself after they had familiarized themselves with, and acknowledged, the message of the Qur'anic text, where these issues were discussed. Hence, people should make their own interpretations of the issue:

*Aida: So nowhere in the Qur'an I can read that [...] you have to be covered.*

*NR: Hm [nodding].*

*Aida: No it's, it says that aa, they [referring here to the people implementing Islamic way of dressing or maybe more unconditional views on Islamic precepts] call this thing that they put [...] they call, they call it head craft [head gear] [...] and they say with a head craft [head gear] you cover your aa precious things [referring here to the understanding that Muslims are in the Quranic text encouraged to cover their precious things].*

*NR: Hm.*

*Aida: But they don't say cover your hair or cover your face or cover your... [...] this place [shows the area].*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: Or hands or nothing it says [...] just like cover your precious things, for me my precious thing maybe, I don't know, my genitals [...] for somebody else maybe breasts or...*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: Or somebody else face, so it's not something that, they put it...*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: Like this, so for me the Islam, religion has a lot of deviations [...] and most of them are connected to this kind of wars [...] and money [...] people get money for this.*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Differences in how these Quranic texts, referred to by Aida here, were interpreted, were according to Roald (2001, 256) often connected to the way the position of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad is perceived. Should all Muslim women follow the injunctions and ways of functioning connected to the Prophet's wives, or should the position of the wives be considered as special and separate from others? (Cf. Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 186–187) This excerpt also, again, revealed Aida's relatively critical position towards the groups that lived according to more rigorous Islamic interpretations. She had concerns that people's reasons for being a part of these kinds of groups might be economically motivated, or connected to wider political conflicts and/or pursuits of power, or other advantages.

Of the women Zainab, Hawwa, Sabah and Fatima mentioned clothing as a differentiating factor in religious practice. Fatima described the Islamic veil as an ageless piece of cloth worn by Muslim women. Contrary to the Christians, Muslim women wore the veil no matter what the fashion trends were like. (Fatima) Zainab said that she did not know of any prohibitions concerning the expression of religion in the Republic of Macedonia. However she suspected that if, for example, a

doctor wore an Islamic veil, some patients would not use her services. Even though the law approved it, society found it difficult to 'accept you like that' (Zainab). Aida thought also that attending university veiled was possible, but that being employed by the state could be more complicated (Aida; cf. Sakaranaho 1998, 204–205).

Göle points out that the secularity of a state could be interpreted so that the public sphere becomes 'neutral' and citizens are then expected to bracket their ethnic, religious or class origins. The Islamic headscarf could be seen as contesting not only secular neutrality, but also gender equality. (Göle 2010, 249) However, as mentioned above in the Macedonian case, the Muslim women had obtained concessions, for example in the question of photos for IDs. It could also be questioned whether the veil in the Macedonian context became more a symbol of being an Albanian than of being a Muslim in the public sphere, as the country's two biggest ethnic groups belonged respectively to different religious groups. The Islamic veil might also be understood as concretely embodying a contradiction in the Macedonian identity – which is eager to prove its Western European nature – as these Muslim women by their citizenship are nevertheless still Macedonians (cf. EWIC 2007b, 50). Today's covered Muslim women can be both pious and public and not segregated in the private sphere. Göle thinks that this '[w]omen's move represents a spatial transgression for both the religious and the secular' and thus '[t]he frontiers between the traditional and the pious are unsettled, as is that between the secular and the public' (Göle 2010, 256–257). In covering them-selves Muslim women became publicly more visible and could unsettle Islamic norms of modesty and the secular definitions of the feminist self (Göle 2010, 257).

Islamic law schools differ on the position taken towards female veiling and the Hanafi school of law, for example, does not consider the face-veil as obligatory (Roald 2001, 267). However, the views of different Sunni schools of law are not mutually exclusive (Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 5; Perho 2004, 77) and the majority of the Islamic scholars interpret Islamic ethics as dictating that woman should dress in covering garments. It is often thought that the more women cover themselves, the more dedicated they are to Islam. (Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 187) Miriam Cooke discusses the many meanings given to Islamic veil in a way that might help to explain the prevailing diversity of interpretations and expressions of religious conviction and identity also in the Republic of Macedonia:

*The veil, however, is many things. It may be a traditional, culturally diverse form of body or face, or it may be a modern, fashionable form of dress, or it may be a kind of severe political uniform. Despite the wide variety, the veil is often reduced to a simple symbol. For the outsider, it is the emblem of Muslim women's oppression and marginalization. While this may be accurate in the cases where women did not choose to veil, it is not necessarily true for those who have chosen to mark themselves out religiously. For many of these women, the veil can be empowering.*

[...]

*The veil in this late twentieth century context is riddled with contradictions. It marks the piety of the individual and of the society by reinforcing women's traditional role as cultural custodians, at the same time that it facilitates educational and professional activities. The veil imprisons and liberates.*

*(Cooke 2002, 153, 154)*

Similar to Cooke, McGuire emphasizes this ambivalence of religious traditions, as they might be sources of 'domination, inequality, and violence as well as cooperation, harmony, and mutual respect' (McGuire 2008, 53). There are many possible reasons for veiling in a manner that is associated with Islam. Some saw the Islamic scarf as a manifestation of the way the women have always functioned and as a part of women's clothing. Some wished to indicate by using it that they were Muslims, for others the political message transmitted by the veil was more important. For some it might be a symbol of one's own culture. Some women wore it because they experienced social pressure to do so and some might feel safer while wearing it. (Cf. Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 184; EWIC 2007b, 50) Also, some Muslims have always thought that one's inner faith in God is the most important thing, not the clothing (Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 187; e.g. Aida). Due to the lack of an authoritative voice at the level of popular Islamic traditions, there was no 'correct version' of popular religion, but rather a range of widely varying, even opposing social values, and their manifestations, that could all be underpinned by the tradition (cf. McGuire 2008, 53).

Against the background of these meanings which have been given to the Islamic scarf, I could see traces of different reasons for using it in the field I researched. From what I observed, the use of the scarf in the Republic of Macedonia could be traced, for example, to it being a traditional way of dressing, an identity-related adoption of a stance, a convictional calling or a personal choice. It was also thought by some to be the choice of women who were paid to wear it, and, also, as a religiously devotional act one could distance oneself from. The veil



could moreover augment a woman's visual integrity and privacy, as while wearing it and expressing her religious identity publicly she enjoyed certain respect in her community (e.g. Fatima) and in this way her personal privacy and social respectability may have increased (cf. Sakaranaho 1998, 204). That is, behind these superficially rather similar public manifestations of Muslim identity, there might lay diverse motivations. Wadud emphasizes furthermore that one could not tell a Muslim woman's sense of personal bodily integrity or piety on the basis of the veil she wore. (Cf. Wadud 2007, 219–220) These aspects related to the clothing of Muslim women seemed to intrigue people particularly in the Western world, even though Islamic law concerns the clothing of all, men as well as women. One woman I spoke to in the course of my fieldwork said distinctly that it often seemed that people had the assumption that the veiled women were not very aware. She argued that using the veil did not create individuals who would not choose themselves what to do either in religious questions or in other areas of life. Thus, the veil did not prevent a woman from thinking independently. (Field diary) The question of veiling and clothing was, however, one which the Albanian women elaborated on in the interviews as related to Islamic religious practice, and hence to the women's identities as Muslims and women.

The Muslim women's veil in recent years has become a symbol of Islam and it has often acquired an overstated role in the discussions and debates concerning Islam and Muslims (Akar and Sakaranaho 2004, 184; Wadud 2007, 219). It even seems that gender and Islam cannot be discussed without bringing up questions related to the veil (Wadud 2007, 219). Roald observes that Western researchers, Muslim feminists and Islamists have all been active in the debate concerning veiling. Western researchers and Muslim feminists often tend to see in the Islamic veil a manifestation of some sort of oppression and male domination, whereas Islamists tend to perceive it as a symbol of dignity, honour and distinction. While this debate of opposing views takes place on several different levels, there is often no point of contact between the different arguments. (Roald 2001, 299) Based on hadith literature regarding female (as well as male) dress, Roald proposes, however, that what is described in the hadiths 'is a general style of dress rather than a fixed form' (Roald 2001, 267).

### Religious Role Models

When I asked them about their religious role models, ten of the Albanian women mentioned the Prophet Muhammad as the most important. He was perceived as the perfect example of a believer (e.g. Hanifa; Habiba; Nuriya; Amina; Aisha; Mahabba; Zainab). As Hanifa, who was a Sunnite, explained in her answer: 'The best example is the Prophet, may peace of Allah be upon him, his life, family and those who followed him' (Hanifa). According to Hanifa, everyone was directly connected to God and there was nothing between God and his creation (Hanifa; cf. Wadud 2007, 29). In addition, she emphasized the significance of the Prophet as an example, not as an intermediary of some kind. Nuriya, Aisha and Mahabba, like Hanifa, were all of a Sunni background. Nuriya saw the Prophet as 'the light of all human beings' (Nuriya). Aisha considered that the question of Islamic role models should be posed in the singular, as the Prophet Muhammad, 'he is the perfect one and we all try to follow him' (Aisha). Mahabba had read the hadiths, the Qur'an and other literature related to the life and deeds of the Prophet. Her view, like Aisha's, was that the Prophet was the most perfect person that had ever existed. (Mahabba)

Wafa said for her part that one might be able freely to live out one's religiosity, 'but it's normally better if somebody is helping you' (Wafa). After she lost her father, she had found spiritual guidance from the head of the Bektashi tarikat in the Republic of Macedonia – Baba Mondi – and she said that 'aa very good believer, very good Muslim can give a special help [...] spiritual help' (Wafa). For Amala, who had a mixed religious background, Baba Tahir, who had previously been influential in the Harabati Baba tekke in Tetovo, was a religiously meaningful person, and she stated: 'I loved the way he was explaining religion' (Amala). Qadr, who came from a Sunni background, did not have any religious role models (Qadr). Sunnite Fatima made also the point that there was no one between her and God and that that kind of thinking was forbidden for her as a believer (Fatima). Zainab who was a Sunnite also remarked that there was no one between God and the human being and that the relationship between them was special. She thought that having a guide in spiritual matters could be good so that one could ask about things one did not know. (Zainab) Zainab's, Fatima's and Hanifa's reflections concerning the role of an intermediary most likely emerged at least to some extent from a particular formulation that was in my questionnaire, as well as from the discussions that we had during the interviews and in which I might have

used Christianity as an example. But they were also very clearly based on a Sunnite worldview.

Amina, Farah, Sabah and Hawwa all had Sunni backgrounds. Amina said that she appreciated the imam's help in interpreting the Qur'an. She thought that in general it was enough that she had God in her life. However, she valued the guidance and help provided by the imams, for instance, in interpreting the Qur'an and the example given by the Prophet Muhammad. However, it was more important for Amina to feel religion in her soul. (Amina) Farah mentioned other Prophets besides the Prophet Muhammad as religious role models and as a female religious model, she named the Prophet's wife Aisha. Farah was inspired comprehensively by the example these personages had set; by the ways in which they had made decisions in their lives, solved problems and treated other people. (Farah) Sabah said that at the moment she did not have any religious role models, but that in her earlier years she had found models – in addition to the example given by the Prophet himself, in the Prophet's wife Aisha, his daughter Fatima as well as Miriam (Mary), the mother of the Prophet Isa (Jesus) (Sabah). Hawwa mentioned that besides the example shown by the Prophet Muhammad, 'as a female my idol is always Aisha *radiallah* [anha; may Allah be pleased with her]' (Hawwa). Aisha is particularly important for Sunni Muslims, as a mediator of the hadiths (Akar 2004, 168).

Khadija's most important role models were Baba Mondji and *Dede* Rexhat Bardhi from the Bektashi tarikat. Khadija thought that they were on the right path and were acting rightly. According to her, Baba Mondji had opened the eyes of the people in the Republic of Macedonia as well as abroad to 'what's real Islam' (Khadija). Without Baba Mondji, Khadija could not see that she would be able to carry out her religious practice or her faith. Khadija mentioned that Baba Mondji, in addition to his strong character, had contacts with other nations and peoples. (Khadija) Zahra, who had a mixed religious background, by contrast with Khadija did not have and did not want to have any religious role models involved in her religious practice (Zahra).

Aida said that for her a meaningful religious role model was a certain hodja in Turkey. He was in general not particularly appreciated, but Aida thought that he was turning Islam in the right direction. Thus, Aida seemed to think that the issues the hodja addressed needed new interpretations. As an example, Aida mentioned his teachings concerning women's clothing during the prayer and translations of the Qur'an:

*Aida: Here you can see the woman before they do that ritual [prayer] [...] they go and wear long things, cover their legs [...] cover their hands, put something on the hair, are dressed like you know, [...] Covered all.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Aida: And after that they go and pray and this hodja said: you cannot, you don't have to do that [...] you can pray as well as you are 'cause God created you naked [...] so, okay, you cannot pray naked but, [...] but you can pray whatever you are dressed with.*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

According to the teachings of this hodja, looser dressing was needed only when women prayed with men, so that they would not be sexually attractive to men while praying in different positions, which might distract the men from their prayer. The hodja had also criticized translations of the Qur'an and considered them to have inevitably been influenced by the translator, because sometimes one word, for example, could have many different meanings and by choosing one among many, the translator had an impact on the contents. That was why the hodja encouraged people to read for themselves and not to believe in what others might have translated and understood.

In the material there was a relatively wide variety of responses in terms of religious role models. Women who were closer to the Bektashi tradition emphasized the meaning of the spiritual guidance a Muslim might need from someone within the religious community. The women, who were more inclined towards Sunni Islamic interpretations of faith placed more importance on the idea that that one should not have any kinds of intermediaries involved in religious practice, as the relationship with God should be a direct one. However, guidance from imams or religious learned in tasks such as interpreting the Qur'an was appreciated. There was a variety of types of devotion that could be directed towards the religious role models: Zahra for example did not see the need for such model, while Khadija could not carry out her religious practice without the help of one. As regards their identities as Muslims, the religious role models of the women indicated that the women were aware of some doctrinally central aspects in their conviction, be it Bektashi or Sunni. Views and identities perhaps more atypical of Muslims could be detected in the narratives of those women, who distanced themselves from the prevailing norms as they had positive attitudes for interpretations that questioned the generally held Islamic norms, or when they did not consider the adoption of a religious role model to be necessary. Also,

very few of the religious models were women; thus the gender did not seem to matter so much in the question of choosing it.

### **Life in the Hereafter**

Most of the Albanian women (15) interviewed said that belief in life in the Hereafter was important for them and it played a role in the choices they made in everyday life. For Hanifa it was meaningful as it gave direction to a Muslim's life (Hanifa). Wafa considered that this perspective helped Muslims to connect with their religion, as in a sense it encouraged them to reach for a reward, which followed after death. She said as well that, 'if you don't believe in that, you cannot say that you are a Muslim' (Wafa; cf. Roald 2001, 19–20). Thus, believing in a life after death was according to Wafa of crucial significance to a Muslim's religious identity. As discussed earlier this belief belonged to the six tenets a Muslim was expected to believe in (Roald 2001, 19–20). The women often considered that the life preceding one's death was a test in preparation for one's experience of the eternal life, and good behaviour was a duty towards God which would be rewarded with a continuity of life in the Hereafter. (E.g. Amina; Hawwa)

Despite being of the opinion that all religions taught the same thing, the religiously liberal Amala was however slightly skeptical about the continuity of life after death and reflected that maybe it was all about matter or energy which transformed its nature (Amala). For Farah, who defined herself as a religious person, a Muslim and a believer, life in this world had no sense without the idea of a life in the Hereafter. In this respect, she was particularly considerate towards those who had suffered or been exposed to injustice during their worldly lives. For them injustice could seem meaningless, if they did not have something else to wait for. (Farah) Habiba explained that the role of life in the Hereafter in her faith was to ensure that Muslims should do good deeds and follow Islamic principles in this life in order to have another life. She concluded: 'If you do good [...] you find good' (Habiba). For Nuriya too life after death was of great importance, when she said: 'You should live this life to live the other' (Nuriya).

Aisha had a view similar to Nuriya's. She mentioned furthermore that in order to have a life in the Hereafter, a Muslim should work, behave well and do good deeds, including such that did not directly benefit him- or herself, and to avoid doing harm to others. One should not wait for things to be done by others, but instead strive to realize them

by oneself. Life in this world was short and in case a Muslim would be tempted, Aisha thought it would be better if one would think about the life that was waiting. By good behaviour Aisha meant being righteous under all circumstances and being nice to your parents and family. (Aisha) For her, life and death were closely interrelated:

*Aisha [through an interpreter]: How can I live and do good things, if I don't think about death and the day when I will stand in front of God and that soul, that small soul that God has given to me, so pure, I should return [it] to Him like that.  
(Aisha, 25 years old, city dweller)*

Fatima felt that the idea of a life in the Hereafter motivated her to do things in everyday life that she maybe would not be so motivated to do otherwise. These good deeds however played a role in her aspirations to perfection as an individual and a believer. (Fatima) Khadija considered that if you were a good person, even after death your spirit would not die (Khadija). Sabah and Qadr believed also in life after death (Qadr; Sabah). Sabah added as well that for her faith, belief in it was of importance, but she did not have more detailed knowledge regarding this dimension (Sabah). Zahra stated that life in the Hereafter meant a lot to her, but this also involved doubts of its real nature (Zahra). Nawal had not thought about life after death that much and had the opinion that 'you should live a life now even [though] the people are thinking that they should think about the death, the life after death' (Nawal). She said that she could accept the idea of being one part of the biological chain in which life vanished and re-emerged. (Nawal)

The Islamic view of the life in the Hereafter could serve to explain the injustice and suffering. The promise of life in the Hereafter could be seen as a reward after difficulties faced in the worldly life and it had an impact on the women's behaviour on an everyday basis. For many of the women the worldly life seemed to be a passage to another one. That is, this Islamic aspect was of importance to the perceptions and understandings they placed on themselves. Furthermore it was meaningful for the self-presentations and identities as Muslims that the women wished to transmit, as the notion of life in the Hereafter played a role in their ways of behaving in their social environments. As discussed earlier, belief in life in the Hereafter is one of the cornerstones of Islamic faith, however, the women had also contrasting views, which included doubts concerning the continuity of life in the Hereafter. Once more, instances of distancing oneself from, as well as

closer engagements with the Islamic religious tradition were given expression in the Albanian women's wide ranging points of view.

## Knowledge Increases a Muslim's Responsibility

The Islamic scholar Amina Wadud considers that all affairs, private or public, are accountable to Allah and under the sovereignty of Allah's will. Muslims should therefore accept their responsibility as agents of Allah. A Muslim is required to reach for understanding of full moral responsibility, both individually and together with others. Wadud emphasizes that this responsibility includes a flexible attitude, which means that one is ready to change one's perspective on the receipt of new information concerning any issue ensuring that one has 'better means to fulfill that which best reflects the divine will' (Wadud 2007, 34–36). Thus, as one's understanding evolves, one must improve the way one acts, This, Wadud states, is the crux of a Muslim's moral responsibility. Growth in understanding and action concerns the individuals in terms of personal growth and in a wider sense the whole of humanity. (Wadud 2007, 36)

The significance of Islam had often increased during the course of the Albanian women's lives (e.g. Amina; Habiba; Aisha; Mahabba; Farah; Hawwa). In this respect the women particularly mentioned the opportunities they had been given to read and learn about religion by themselves. Mahabba stated that the more she learned about her religion and the better she knew it, the more time she would devote to it (Mahabba). Like many others (e.g. Farah; Fatima; Hawwa; Nuriya; Aisha) Mahabba saw her religiosity as mainly being influenced by experiencing the different stages in life, as well as the knowledge she had gained concerning religion. This knowledge had also changed Mahabba's positioning as a believer and made her feel more responsible and aware of greater number of opportunities:

*Mahabba [through an interpreter]: She [Mahabba] says that yes before you didn't know that much about your religion and you didn't even be, was aware about those possibilities that you had.*

*NR: Yeah.*

*Mahabba: But now I see, read and get knowing about those, yes there is growing, the growth of the responsibility.*

*(Mahabba, 24 years old, village dweller)*

The most important thing for Mahabba was that God was satisfied with her, her work and actions: the way she was doing things. Mahab-

ba reckoned that over the years she had started to dedicate more time to Islam. She thought that her opportunities to learn more through books and classes had made her want to dedicate more of her time to religious praxis. Religious praxis in itself had also had an influence on the development of Mahabba's religiosity. (Mahabba) Thus, the emphasis Mahabba placed on her religious identity was growing and this development had increased her feelings of responsibility.

Aisha also shared the view that Islam had become increasingly meaningful to her over the years, as it was different when religion was taught to you by your parents and when you understood it yourself. To her, taking part for example in a dars had been important for this development, as she stated: 'It's not that I I wasn't a Muslim before, but they made me understand it [Islam] more deeply' (Aisha). The place Islam had in her life was growing:

*Aisha [through an interpreter]: As you grow up and get elder, you get closer to God, like one author has written a book that people until they are forty years old, they grow closely [more close] that connection towards God [...] before the forty years it's like, like it's not that stable, it's like aaa moving, but after the forty years, they grow closer, because they, as they grow older, they will return to God.  
(Aisha, 25 years old, city dweller)*

For Aisha, like Mahabba, her religious identity had become more significant with time, once she had internalized Islam by herself and received more information regarding it. Aisha also mentioned a more philosophical and dogmatic dimension in this process, which could be motivated and explained by having achieved the age of 40, which often has a particular meaning in Islam as a stage of perfection.

Nuriya reflected upon the change that had taken place in her religiosity by stating that before she did not understand religion, but nowadays she had a better perception of it, and that is why she dedicated more time to it. This change had taken place since Nuriya had gone to university, and also the society she was a part of, her friends and an organization that she frequented had influenced her. Nuriya wished however that she could be more religiously active. Nowadays her religiosity manifested itself mainly through praying, reading the Qur'an and helping other people in need. (Nuriya) Like Mahabba and Aisha, Nuriya could see that her religious identity had grown more important with years. Nowadays she gave more time to it and had a better understanding what it meant to be a Muslim. Nuriya considered that her social environment had had a role in these developments.



Farah said that she had always been a believer, but that reading and learning had taught her to appreciate religious things more. In this way, Farah thought, one gained knowledge, which turned into a certain wisdom. Farah had also received an Islamic education through participating in dars and listening to lectures by an imam once a week. Farah related that the imam's lecturing was spiritually awakening and she appreciated the guidance from someone who knew more and who had studied Islamic writings. (Farah) Thus the transformations in Farah's religious identity seemed to be particularly supported by the information and education that she had received. Fatima for her part said that she had not been interested in religious issues during her teenage years and thought it might have had something to do with what she had observed of other Muslims. However the situation had changed when she became a grown-up. Thereafter Fatima had found information concerning Islam and deepened her knowledge. (Fatima) She also reflected upon the change within her and the attitudes that she had:

*Fatima [through an interpreter]: When I've been more younger and I've been watching and caring about only my interests and rights, and I have never felt that that right or those interests could hurt anybody, she [Fatima] didn't care at all and now she [Fatima] says, being in Islam and being a Muslim like it should be, she [Fatima] says I am I am more careful about hurting the other peoples with my rights and interests and sometimes [there can] even [be] a case where I will decrease my interests and rights in case for the other to not get hurt.  
(Fatima, 24 years old, village dweller)*

As Islam in Fatima's life became more important, the changes in her religious identity manifested in her behaviour and in her consideration towards her social environment, as there were expectations of how a Muslim should be and behave towards others.

Hawwa thought that she had gained more knowledge about her religion in recent years. She had also become more independent and could take decisions more autonomously than before. Earlier, only two years ago, she had often consulted her sister and father on different issues. However, she described the family relationships as very close and had difficulties in seeing herself separated from the family. Hawwa did not think that she would have been an unbeliever before, but said that 'now I could say in a full meaning of the word, I am a believer now, and I I feel like a peace and calm inside myself' (Hawwa). Despite these changes towards making decisions more independently, family had however maintained its important place in her life: it was

the most important thing, followed by praying and believing (Hawwa). Islam had a positive influence on Hawwa as a woman when it came to religious practice: praying, fasting or other obligations. She described the change Islam had made in her life and in her heart of hearts:

*Hawwa [through an interpreter]: So like the moment I started to pray, it has influenced in me and my life [...] I used to wear clothes where I showed more nakedness than I do now and I didn't have a shame for that now I cannot do [that] and go out of my house like that [...] it [faith] showed me the importance of the health [...] religion is the one that aa make me behave better towards me, towards myself [...] it has shown out my behaving towards the others [...] I used to say and comment the negative aspects of the other person [...] the religion is the one that says: 'hey, look at yourself, you are not perfect, nobody's perfect'. (Hawwa, 22 years old, city dweller)*

If Hawwa previously had sought to hurt others with negative remarks, Islam had changed this aspect of her behaviour. She also thought that maybe age had something to do with this change. In Hawwa's narrative religious identity had gained more importance once she reached maturity. Hawwa described her religious identity and faith as sources of inner calm and an inspiration of better behaviour towards others.

Most of the Albanian women interviewed did not conceive of any criticism that might be directed at Islam as a religion (e.g. Farah; Fatima; Zainab; Nuriya; Sabah; Aisha; Hawwa; Amina; Mahabba; Hanifa). Fatima reflected on the matter and stated that one could criticize the actions and opinions of the Muslims, but not the faith, as it was perfect (Fatima). Hanifa also underlined that religions should not be criticized, but that everybody should have respect for other religions (Hanifa). Zainab thought that Islam could be analyzed, but in order to criticize Islam one should have knowledge and facts to do so (Zainab). Habiba did not like the idea of criticizing Islam (Habiba). Sabah stated that: 'There is no way to criticize Islam [...] it could be analyzed, but not criticized' (Sabah). Aisha and Hawwa had even stricter views: they thought that even analyzing Islam in the same way as other opinions or values would be out of question (Aisha; Hawwa). When it came to criticizing religion in the local context of the Republic of Macedonia, Khadija thought that:

*Khadija [through an interpreter]: You can find something that it can aa [be] bad for people...*

*NR: In religion?*

*Khadija: In the way they are doing [practising] the religion...*

*NR: Okay.*

*Khadija: But you cannot [...] you are not allowed to to criticize them. (Khadija, 53 years old, village dweller)*

Here Khadija was most likely referring particularly to the Sunni community, from which she distanced herself with her remark. She found it hard to identify herself with their way of being Muslim, now that she had found her own Bektashi way. She also thought that the Sunni community received criticism poorly. Khadija and Fatima made a distinction between religion and how it was practised by people. Despite their different religious backgrounds and the different generations these two women belonged to, they shared somewhat similar views of religion as an ideal and of the deeds of the Muslims as separate from the ideal religion represented. Unlike the majority, Nawal, Qadr and Aida did not envisage any obstacles as to why religious convictions could not be analyzed and criticized (Nawal; Qadr; Aida).

The Albanian women's ways of describing their increased responsibility and acknowledgment as Muslims – the emphasis they put on their religious identities – was motivated and influenced, according to them, in addition to the increased amount of knowledge they had regarding Islam by other issues, such as the circles the women frequented, the religious education they had received and their religious praxis itself. The notion of directing criticism towards Islam evoked a diverse range of stances, but most of the women thought that one should be careful about this kind of behaviour or avoid it altogether.

#### **'I Always in the End of the Day, I Pray to God and Say Thank You'**

(Qadr, 27 years old, village dweller)

In this subsection I bring together some impressions related to faith and gratitude, which surfaced in the interviews and were a part of the Albanian women's constructions of their identities as Muslims.

For Fatima, faith was the most important aspect of her religiosity and this was followed in importance by good behaviour, as was discussed above. Sunnite Fatima thought that these two aspects were inseparable and could, according to her, make the life in society better in a wider sense. (Fatima) Bektashi Wafa saw that devotion in faith

included, in addition to believing in God, continuous learning, reading the Qur'an, but also other works (Wafa). For Khadija, the most indispensable element of her faith was to be on the right, Bektashi, path (Khadija). Hence, the faith these women had was, as were their religious identities, expressed through deeds such as choosing the right religious path, devotion, belief, continuous learning, behaviour, reading the Qur'an and other literature.

Of the women, Aisha said that the most indispensable things in life at the time of the interview were that she knew Allah as God, Muhammad as His last Prophet and that she herself belonged to Islam. In addition, in parallel to faith and sincerity, she mentioned the significance of namaz – prayer, for her religious practice. Aisha described how prayer filled her with enthusiasm and energy so that she could carry on doing other things and to work. It also gave her spiritual peace. (Aisha; cf. McGuire 2008, 102) Hawwa for her part placed belief in the second place after knowing God, the One that had created her. The three most important matters related to her religiosity were the iman, the Prophet Muhammad and belief in God. (Hawwa) For Farah these three important matters were believing in God, oneness of God and a very high level of self-consciousness. These were followed by prayer and dua'. (Farah) In these responses of Aisha, Hawwa and Farah, the women's religious identities could be seen to have been rooted in a belief in one God and in the Islamic metaphysical realities, knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad and belonging to Islam. As more practical religious manifestations women mentioned prayer and dua'. Aisha also described how ritual prayer supported her religious identity as a Muslim and gave her strength even to carry on with other things in life.

Zahra said that faith had a role in her personal choices, as Islam gave her confidence that life, despite all the changes it included, was proceeding in a better direction. Earlier, when Zahra had faced difficult times in her life, she had had thoughts about devoting her life to God. She spoke about the possibility at that time of retreating to a monastery where she could have spent her time in prayer surrounded by people with similar aspirations as herself. Zahra had a mixed religious background, which could explain her reflections on the Christian religious establishment rather than an Islamic one. Furthermore, she considered that 'if I don't believe in God probably it [there] will not be tranquility in my heart' (Zahra). Zahra thought this was difficult to explain, but the link between life and God should be very strong. For Zahra people who believed in God were all Muslims, as this word

meant a believer, but the Islamic religion was something different and she disagreed with many people concerning the issues related to Islamic religion and its practice. (Zahra) In this view Zahra distanced herself from identifying strictly as a Muslim belonging socially to a certain religious group that would observe a certain religious way of functioning. Practising the Islamic religion, being a Muslim and having a Muslim identity were not entirely commensurate in her eyes. On the contrary, Zahra considered it justified emphasizing her more personal and individual religious identity and her opinions regarding Islam.

Nuriya thought, like Zahra, that Islam had an influence on the personal choices that she made. She also said that religious practice was meaningful for her as a woman in 'the way it uplifts me in the spiritual way' (Nuriya). Thus, Islam had significance as a guide in Nuriya's personal choices and elevated her in her religious practice. Contrary to Nuriya, Nawal did not think that Islam would be a part of her personal choices. However, being a Muslim and a woman were both important aspects in her life and she wished that religion would be used for good purposes. Nawal stated furthermore that 'thanks [to] God, I am a Muslim' and she saw having a good character and being tolerant as embedded in her faith. (Nawal) Even though Islam, for Nawal, did not play a role in her choices, it was not meaningless as she was grateful for being a Muslim and having a Muslim identity and wished to use religion for good ends. Qadr thought that even though life itself changed everyday some Islamic basic values, such as being honest and open and not stealing, were always with her despite the transitions she herself might go through (Qadr). Islam and Muslim identity could therefore function as a kind of order, or anchor, in change, a base upon which one could, in different ways, establish an identity.

One of the reference persons saw a connection between faith and transparency: 'Most of the people who are believers, I believe everybody who says I am a good believer, they have nothing to fear or they have nothing to hide' (Interview 10). This comment probably referred to the various suspicions, which globally are currently directed towards Muslim populations, and the ideas of what being a Muslim means. Zainab stated that honest and sincere faith was indispensable to a Muslim. She, like Hawwa, also emphasized the significance of believing in God's oneness; that there was only one God:

*Zainab: Most aa important element is to believe in that God is one [...] just one, no friends, no saint, no children [...] no wife, nothing, it's just one God and it is most important thing and after that aa to be good Muslim, you have to practise the re, the religion [asks for a word from the interpreter] [...] rituals [...] [...] like namaz and [...] and they are, but aa faith is very important [...] if you don't have faith everything is dvelitsnost [meaning doublefaced in Macedonian].  
(Zainab, 25 years old, city dweller)*

Zainab put much emphasis on the faith, which a Muslim should first and foremost have. Faith would be followed by the actual religious practice in the construction of a religious identity. What Zainab states follows the ways in which Roald (2001) and Hajjar (2008) described the central tenets of Islam and of being a Muslim. Furthermore, this excerpt implied that Zainab knew of other religious worldviews, in which God might be considered to have friends, saints, children or a wife. She made a clear-cut distinction between these views and what was the Islamic perception. For Farah knowing God was at the heart of her faith. If you knew God, everything else became easier to understand and questions would find their own answers. That is, religious identity seemed to function as the framework within which all the other aspects of life were to be placed. Farah described this as: 'It's like the source of of absolute mind [...] and absolute knowledge at the source of the unlimited love' (Farah). This experience encouraged Farah to learn more and more about aspects related to God, as 'there is nothing on heaven or earth that is not related to Him' (Farah). Farah's reflections also follow Islamic scholar Amina Wadud's (2007) thoughts about *tawhid* (oneness of God), which emphasize the unicity of everything in God.

The women often portrayed religion and faith as being everywhere at all times. Thus, religious identities were acknowledged and offered a wider framework of reference that was not limited by time or space. Some women described, for instance, how Islam permeated the being of the believer and could not be limited to a certain moment such as the time of prayer (e.g. Aisha; Farah; Mahabba; Zainab). Aida, Amina and Zainab added that Islam in their lives could not be located in some particular place or space either, such as the mosque, because Islam was everywhere (Aida) and omnipresent in the life of a religious person (Zainab). Amina also thought that the absence of religion and its principles would make you lose something in life. (Amina) Regarding the omnipresence of Islam Aisha said: 'I live with the religion all day long, it's Islam and everything I do, it's connected to it' (Aisha). Mahabba's religiosity was manifested in various ways also outside the

moments she devoted to God, as faith was with her all the time. This was the way she considered it to be for the believers: the worshipping never ended. (Mahabba) Zainab said that it was very important to her personally to be close to God. She said that this could take place anywhere, for example in the street – when she needed help, or something else, she addressed herself to God. For this, Zainab did not feel that she needed a particular milieu or help from others. She could be religious anywhere and have a close relationship with God. (Zainab) Thus, in the women's descriptions their religious identities could be found embedded and enacted in surprising contexts and locations. Farah discussed this connection between the believers and Islam:

*Farah: Since it's, it's not an independent thing from the human life the religion, I mean it's, it's you are tied about it, it's with you everywhere [...] and it has a big influence 'cause it shows to you how to behave when you are a child, how to be when you are a student and when you are in a relationship [...] before you get married and after you get married and as grandmothers....*  
(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)

Farah notes that religion was always tied to human existence, and therefore present everywhere the person was. Islam had a deep significance during different phases of life, as it adjusted and guided the behaviour of a Muslim woman through different life stages. Also Dahlgren mentions this human mediation and considers Islam to be a particular kind of knowledge that was applied when people practised Islam and made meaning in their lives (Dahlgren 2004, 21). While referring to her own emotional experiences, also Zahra underlined God's omnipresence:

*Zahra: I feel that it's [religion is] always with me [...] wherever I go, I think of God [...] and I believe that God is with me all the time [...] I don't have to pray and don't have to go to mosque, I don't have to go to church, I feel that, God, wherever I am.*  
(Zahra, 59 years old, village dweller)

In this excerpt Zahra seemed to place Islam once more in the personal and individual sphere, as she did not consider it important, for example, to visit religious places, which were often social places or to perform religious rites in order to be with God. Zahra told that her religiosity could take place for instance in the car or in her house. (Zahra) Thus her religious identity did not seem to require a validation of some kind from the others, as she could feel God's presence everywhere. Habiba's way of functioning was slightly different, as

she was convinced that one should not only think about God every day, but also implement this through praying to God, for example, for good things and protection for her whole family, so that they would have good health and be financially successful in their work (Habiba). That is, for Habiba religious identity seemed to place one under more expectations as to what should be done for religious reasons. Qadr considered that Islam had an impact on how she lived her life and in the social and societal questions she faced. She thought that she could express her religious identity and religiosity freely as she did that 'all the time [smiles]' (Qadr).

Zainab said that she could perform her religious practice anywhere, for example when she prayed. Like Nawal she thought that there were not any particular places where she was obliged to go. (Zainab; Nawal) Aida mentioned that Islam was manifested in her way of expressing gratitude to God, in praying and in her manner of loving other people. She also described how in her everyday life she was constantly thanking God for everything she received from or gave to others. Aida said: 'When I go to sleep, when I wake up, when I feed my child, when I feed myself [...] it's all like thanks to God [...] that I have all this' (Aida). Also Qadr expressed herself somewhat similarly:

*Qadr: I am grateful in the end of the day, aa for the day that I had [...] for the good things that I had today [...] and I always in the end of the day, I pray to God and say thank you.  
(Qadr, 27 years old, village dweller)*

For Qadr one of the three most important aspects related to her understanding of Islam was to be satisfied and happy with, and thus grateful for, the things that one had towards God (Qadr). Amala mentioned also that she thanked God once difficulties faced had passed. Amala's, Aida's and Qadr's descriptions of how they prayed and directed their thanks towards God, without for example joining others in the prayer space five times a day, sketched images of individual and private religiosities and religious identities, which did not necessarily reach the public sphere. Regarding gratitude Amina remarked in her interview that Islam permeated people's everyday lives and, because God created everything, one should be thankful to Him (Amina).

For Aisha, Islamic conviction meant happiness and satisfaction. She wished that she could share this feeling with others so that they would join her on the right path and have a chance to find the same state of happiness. She concluded her thoughts by saying, 'that peace that I have inside my soul and spirit always [...] I would like to share



it with the others [...] so that they could join' (Aisha). Mahabba too mentioned that being a Muslim in her own community offered her a chance to tell others about a different and better way of life. Because of this she considered that being a Muslim gave her a lot of opportunities within her community. (Mahabba) Khadija wished that the community of believers would grow so that everybody could find faith (Khadija). Khadija concluded the interview by stating that the most important things in her faith were not to speak about inaccurate things, not to steal and to be generous: 'Give as much as you want' (Khadija). The women described their lives as Muslims, or their Muslim identities with many words linked with positive emotions such as gratitude, happiness, satisfaction and peace. There were also some, both Sunnite and Bektashi, who wished to share their positive experiences as Muslims with others and invite them to see the possible benefits of faith or religious conviction.

**'I Was Raised by My Parents to Love People for Not Who They Are, But How They Are'**

(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)

In many aspects the Islamic tradition emphasizes the golden rule of reciprocity as the highest universal ideal of human relationships. As an example Wadud mentions a Prophetic hadith, which states that '[o]ne of you does not believe until he/she loves for the other what is loved for self'. (Wadud 2007, 29)

For the Albanian women interviewed love was present in their experiences of Islamic religiosity, in enacting their faith and in the construction of their identities. Aida for instance saw an intensive connection between faith and love, when she thought that 'those [people] who don't believe in nothing, I don't think that they are loving with something' (Aida). Aida perceived love as being so intimately tied to faith and religious identity that she could not see these two really fully existing without each other. Important elements linked to Aida's Islamic religiosity and her religious identity as a Muslim included being honest, loving people, being clean and being close to everybody. (Aida) Most of these elements concerned the interactions Aida as a Muslim had with others, and thus the social environment was, once more, a significant arena for enacting one's religious identity. As the most indispensable aspects of her faith, Amina mentioned firstly believing in God, praying and fasting, as activities which touched her most personally as a believer in terms of faith and concrete religious practice.

Secondly Amina brought up friendship, respecting everybody, love, tolerance and good behaviour. These, in contrast to the first mentioned qualities, were directed towards other people and the social environment. Amina explained that faith gave her strength and happiness and helped her to love other people. It also increased tolerance and a good behaviour towards others. However, what was most important for Amina was 'to feel God in your soul' (Amina), that is, within Amina's religious identity the more emotional aspect of experiencing God was emphasized.

For Zainab the most important religious element was faith in God's oneness. Thereafter she mentioned love for Allah and other people. (Zainab) In Amala's interview more general aspects of the Bektashi tradition were discussed. The Bektashi tradition for example included a perception that the first thing in the Bektashi way of living was to know oneself so that one could know God and the second thing was to love people, so that one could be loved. Thus, one had to love others so that they could love one. When I asked Amala to mention three important concepts related to her religion, she listed the following: to read, not to do bad things and to love. She also stated that the two most important things in her faith were to know how to forgive, which made the person spiritually clean, and to know how to love, which rendered possible the love for God and other persons. (Amala) All of Amala's perceptions were active, emotionally coloured ways of enacting and constructing a religious identity, which often was directed towards the social environment. In Zainab's view, faith was in a sense as a foundation on which loving others was built.

For Khadija who, like Amala, reflected on these aspects from the Bektashi angle, Islam was not a focus of interest, but rather something she loved with her spirit. She was happy and felt that God had helped her. Visits to a tekke and the consciousness of the help of the babas gave her satisfaction. The most important things in her life were her family, to help the tekkes and all the babas. (Khadija) Zahra mentioned that the three important words or notions related to her faith were God, love and hope. In her interpretation of faith, love was mentioned again among other central aspects, as well as respect towards other people. In addition to the qualities of love and respect, she always tried to help others if she could. She did not want to harm anyone and concluded the interview by stating: 'I respect them [others], as long as they respect me' (Zahra). In the Albanian women's descriptions, loving God and other people, as well as helping and respecting others were intimately linked to the perceptions the women had of what it

meant to be a Muslim and have a Muslim identity. These inner ideals were enacted in the women's social environments through their behaviour. Even here it seemed that different actions taken that influenced others were important for constructing an identity as a Muslim.

### **Some Perceptions of the Human Being and Purity in Islam**

*Aida: When the child is born, he is clean.  
(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Even though ideals might vary in different parts of the Muslim world, cleanliness, purity and pleasant scents are appreciated. Cleanliness is a part of Islamic religiosity and hygiene is perceived as being linked to taking care of the body. (Hallenberg 2008, 83–85). These purity-related aspects are elaborated on even in the Qur'anic texts such as 2:222, 'Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves'. One hadith text states also that 'cleanliness is half of faith'. Before prayer, or *namaz*, the visible parts of the body, the face, the hands and the feet, were always washed. This is known as *wudu*. The more comprehensive wash, *ghusl*, which includes washing one's hair, is needed after menstruation and sexual intercourse as well as after the discharge that follows the childbirth. Thus, everything sexual and procreational was ritually impure and demanded that *ghusl* would be observed. A woman was more often in the state of impurity than a man and during those periods she could not pray, touch the Qur'an, fast or go to the mosque. (Akar and Tiilikainen 2004, 16; Hallenberg 2008, 86)

Of the Albanian women interviewed, Aida explained that in Islam a newborn child was seen as being born in a natural state and that s/he was therefore pure. According to Aida's description, due to the cleanliness aspect of the Islamic faith, a child was born as a Muslim in this state of purity. (Aida) The women elaborated further in the interviews on the positive Islamic perception of the human being and often also how it was related to that of purity. Farah thought that:

*Farah: It's aa, you [human being] are the perfect creature [...] the, the miracle of the world [...] yes you are the miracle of the world [...] that is how it is perceived and everything it's aa bent on you like [...] it's aa made for you, you just live and follow the rules.  
(Farah, 22 years old, city dweller)*

How Farah described the place human beings have in the world according to Islamic principles put the human being in a very high and central position, as everything in the world was made in order to support and assist human existence. Farah also made a reference to the Islamic code of behaviour as an important part of being a Muslim and having a Muslim identity. Habiba and Hawwa described human beings as God's highest creation (Habiba; Hawwa), and as the only one among all the creatures who had been given consciousness (Hawwa). From her perspective on religious matters, Nawal too saw human beings as very precious, and she thought that people should always be seen firstly as such, as human beings. For Nawal pureness was the most essential element of her faith. At the end of her interview, Nawal stated that:

*Nawal: I think that the man should be aa very honest [...] the man should be friendly to the others, he aa to have his elementary human thoughts [...] on his, on himself, you know aa [lowers her voice] not to think bad for someone, to mean harm to anyone else [...] to be in one aa with one word, to be exactly human being [...] not a man.  
(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)*

Nawal thought that a human being had to be in the first place human and not defined by his/her gender or anything else. Being human meant for Nawal not to harm or damage others and instead to be friendly and honest and to think humanely. Thus, actions towards the others in the social world were once more emphasised as religiously significant. Tuula Sakaranaho puts weight on the significance that the aspirations of being a good person in Islam has in similar way to Nawal did: 'Being a full human being is seen as a synonym for being a good Muslim' (Sakaranaho 1998, 207). A good person is considered better than one with bad characteristics, regardless of gender (Sakaranaho 1998, 207).

For Sabah, like Farah, the human being was at the centre of the whole of creation with all the characteristics that made one human and could offer strong self-esteem (Sabah). Khadija said that the perception of the Bektashi path was that the human beings should be clean and have a clean soul. She thought, for instance of the babas within the tarikat as very clever, clean and honest people. (Khadija) For Zahra, Islam in itself was a very clean and good religion, if the Qur'an was followed. She thought as well that people belonging to different religions should have respect for each other. (Zahra) In her interview Habiba said that she thought that the first steps of a child on the way to knowing Islam were observing hygiene and knowing how to love.

She considered these aspects as being generally central to the Islamic way of life. Besides hygiene and love for all people, for the environment, for the world and the planet, she mentioned the significance of education too. (Habiba) Qadr's Islamic interpretation of the human being was of the following kind:

*Qadr: Aa born as an angel, pure as a water [smiles] [...] protected by Allah [...] guide be Allah aamm, human being, hmm, very smart, but only if you know how to use it, of course.  
(Qadr, 27 years old, village dweller)*

In Qadr's description too, human beings were seen in a very positive light, as pure and intelligent, existing under Allah's protection and being guided by Allah. However, Qadr mentioned additionally that one should know how to use this given intelligence well. In the interview, Amina described the human being as a creation of God who was born with freedom. If the person wished to have absolute freedom, Amina stated that: 'It can be achieved only with the relation towards God' (Amina). Aida saw the human being in the light of her religion as nice, kind and open to all the people, as well as being faithful and clean. As a part of the indispensable aspects of her faith she brought up the acts of being honest and being clean. (Aida) Mahabba considered the human being as the highest thing in creation, to whom intellect and self-consciousness has been given and who had come to this worldly life in order to fulfill a particular mission and goal. (Mahabba)

Zainab emphasized the responsibility that human beings had for their actions. Nobody could be responsible for your actions except yourself. Every person had to answer for one's actions, how one had talked and lived. (Zainab) A patriarchal perception of the regulations imposed on the person from outside could however pass over the idea of the human being as a creature who was responsible of his/her own morality (Hallenberg 2008, 94). As Wadud poignantly concludes: 'Patriarchal control over what it means to be human robs females of their God-given agency and full humanity' (Wadud 2007, 255). Zainab wanted also to highlight that 'a human being in Islam is a unique [...] just a one can be like you' (Zainab). Thus, Zainab's perceptions underlined the uniqueness of each human being and responsibilities they should acknowledge as regards the things they did. According to Wadud, human beings as trusted servants of Allah on earth are charged with fulfilling this trust. This involves voluntary obedience to God's will and participation in this obedience; acts which implied responsibility. This responsibility and willingness to one's surrendering are central

in the hadith text Wadud cites: 'Would you serve Allah? Serve your fellow creatures (first)' (Wadud 2007, 33–34).

The Islamic image of a human being in the women's perceptions included self-consciousness, intellect, kindness towards others and honesty, as well as being faithful and clean. Purity and being clean were meaningful aspects for these Albanian women's religious identities and they often seemed to represent ideals that were linked to human beings and religion. These aspects could be emphasized in diverse ways as hygiene in itself, the purity of soul or that of religion or of faith. A newborn child was also described as pure. How the women perceived the human being through their Islamic interpretations underlined the central and highly important place s/he occupied in God's creation, equipped with intellect and emergent from this state of purity. These ideas could support the women's self-esteem and help them value more the perceptions and self-presentations they had of themselves. For these women, being a Muslim meant also strivings to be a good person and being responsible for one's actions.

## **Many Islamic or Islam-related Interpretations**

Regarding the different ways of interpreting and living Islam Wadud says: '[N]either their "Islam" nor my "Islam" has ultimate privilege. We are all a part of a complex whole, in constant motion and manifestation throughout the history of multifaceted but totally human constructions of "Islam"' (Wadud 2007, 6). Her point of view, which aims to avoid reductionist and oversimplified claims invites us to reflect on what 'true Islam' really is, and questions if it can be possessed. Furthermore Wadud urges the Muslims to encounter their responsibility for the fact that there have been and are evil and unjustified actions occurring in the world, which are justified with Islam. (Wadud 2007, 6)

The Albanian women interviewed often seemed to be very aware of the difference between Islam and 'what Muslims do', a theme which is also discussed by Wadud (2007). Zahra for instance stated: 'It's not problem, religion, it's problem it's, some people, how they think' (Zahra). She also considered that we were all children of God and 'I always think that religion is man-made [...] man may aa mm separate us [...] not the God [...] because the God would like us all to be same, all together, all just believe in him' (Zahra). Zahra believed that this kind of man-made religion served somebody's interests, but was not

in the interests of God. (Zahra) Zainab, for her part, saw Islam as one religion and the idea of factions within it she considered to be misunderstandings. In her view the different interpretations, ways of expressing Islam and feeling about religion were dependent on people, who 'cause' the diversity. (Zainab) Aida wished that people would read the Qur'an themselves and not depend so much on the religious guidance given by others:

*Aida: That people start reading Qur'an on their own [...] and understand as they understand it [...] not like somebody says that it has to be, if [...] if I go to mosque and somebody tells me that, look you don't have, in this this page you can read this that you don't have to give loans [...] you cannot take loans from the bank, I take it [the Qur'an] and read it [...] and if I understand it that way, okay I accept it, if I don't understand it, what's the sense? [...] What's the point? He, the man that tells me is not God [...] nobody is not God, there is a book [...] that you have to respect [...] not have, try [...] to respect so [...] it's something how I understand.  
(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

Similar to Aida, Wadud emphasizes the acknowledgment of human involvement in the Qur'anic interpretation and notes furthermore that '[w]ith our human development of postmodernist and deconstructionist disciplines of meaning, we accept the fact that we are potentially guided by the text, even if not limited in its particular utterances' (Wadud 2007, 197). Individual capabilities to conceive of God are linked to individual and civilizational contexts and also to the conceptual constructs at their disposal in each context (Wadud 2007, 198). From Aida's point of view, which is similar to Wadud's, religious identity should not be submitted to what other people say it should contain or look like. Instead a Muslim could decide regarding his/her religiosity her/himself and find ways to develop his/her religious identity through direct connection to the Quranic texts and God.

Of the women, Fatima wished that Muslims who practised their religion would be better received by others in the local context. According to her, this view included also those modern intellectuals who thought that practising Islam meant put one in the wrong. Fatima did not however define more precisely who she referred to with comment, but most likely she spoke of educated people in general who had a negative attitude towards religion or Islam. (Fatima) Zainab did not like the ideas that people had about Islam either. She felt that Islam was misunderstood and stated that contrary to how it is predominantly portrayed, Islam is a religion of peace. Zainab wanted to highlight

that 'what do Muslims [...] it doesn't mean that it is Islam' (Zainab). Wadud highlights furthermore that there are diverse implications behind the ways 'Muslims and non-Muslims consistently or inconsistently use the term "Islam"' (Wadud 2007, 19). She points out that the Western media tends to portray the term 'Islam' as based on 'whatever the Muslims do' (Wadud 2007, 21). The Albanian women noted in similar vein to Wadud that not all the acts performed by the Muslims followed the Islamic ideals or could be recognized as expressions of a Muslim identity.

Aida did not like the currently topical perceptions which gave negative connotations to Islam either. She considered that at the moment, notions such as jihad, suicide and live bomb, made people 'automatically think it's a Muslim', as most likely to perform such a deed (Aida). Aida did not see that people who did these actions as Muslims, even though they called themselves so. In addition, women who were covered in black or people who went to war in order to perform jihad or became suicide bombers, did not win Aida's sympathy:

*Aida: First thing in Muslim religion is that you cannot take life [...] God is the one who gives and is the one that takes [...] also you cannot take your own life.  
(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

She considered that it was harmful to Islam that these people, who thought they were preserving the faith, were actually destroying it. Aida suspected that poor families were paid, for example, to go in public covered in black veils. This would help to distinguish them from other people. Aida saw all of this to be intentional and asked why they could not for instance choose another colour to dress in. (Aida) When freedom of religion was discussed in the interview she said:



*Aida: Everything has to be changed.*

*NR: [Laughs.]*

*Aida: I am not satisfied at all [...] I know that the Muslim religion it's, it's very nice religion [...] it's something very very good and people have to understand it as it is [...] and to show it as it is, it's not something that you have to run away from, it's something that you have to love [...] and the way they are showing [it] now, you, you just run away, even that I, when I am a Muslim, when I see that kind of thing, 'oh my God what kind of religion is this?' [...] You will say, but it's not that, the the problem is that it's [Islam is] not that, [...] and I really hate to say that they, they don't know. They show [...] the religion like [...] killing aa when you say 'I am [from] Muslim religion', you, you think about killing, you think about black, you think about dying [...] suffering, and this [Islam] is not that, it's really not that.*

*(Aida, 30 years old, city dweller)*

For Aida there were several currently topical and mediatized aspects that she considered to be unrelated to her Muslim identity. Suffering, behaving suicidally, killing other people, and women wearing black dresses did not belong to her perceptions of Islam or Muslim identity and she wished that many things would change. What kind of role these often prevailing perceptions concerning Muslims and Islam had in women's lives were highlighted in Nawal's reflections, when she described which community she felt she belonged to: 'I'm Albanian [...] I think as people and I am a Muslim [...] but I am not an extreme Muslim you know [...] this is the answer that I am giving to the people' (Nawal). It seemed that stating one's confessional belonging would put one in a position where one had to justify who one was, why and in which way one was what one was. In the fields of general discussion and of public opinion there was often no epistemological separation between political Islam and the sacred and spiritual Islam: 'one is never certain what is meant by the word "Islam" when it is used', as Wadud notes (Wadud 2007, 57). Thus, the kind of definition Nawal used might become a necessity when making a distinction between one's religious identity and those generally prevailing images of Muslim identity one found one could not recognize one's own religion in.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In the preceding sections I have elaborated on aspects related to the Albanian women's more private and personal ways of living their everyday religiosities, as well as their experiences and impressions

as Muslims regarding the key elements these religiosities were made of. In this endeavour I have striven to identify what these religiosities and Islam itself meant for the identity construction of the women and in what ways Islam and identity constructions might have interacted. I also observed the role that the family background of the women might have had on their Islamic religiosity and sketched in a more detailed manner the Islamic code of behaviour, which the Albanian women repeatedly spoke about in the interviews. Amongst the themes related to behaviour which emerged from the interview material I observed Muslim women's clothing, but also the religious role models of the women and the women's perceptions of life in the Hereafter. I discussed the aspects of responsibility that the women talked about as Muslims, something that they had felt had grown in importance as their knowledge of Islam had increased. Then I observed the interplay of Islam and the concepts of faith, gratitude and love had and what this meant for the Albanian women's identities, particularly as Muslims. I also elaborated on some Islamic perceptions of the human being and purity that the Albanian women described. Finally, I examined the different ways of interpreting and understanding Islam and the opinions the Albanian women had regarding these issues. All of these aspects, which were more closer to the women as believers than those observed in the Chapters Five and Six, narrated of more personal ways of being a Muslim woman and having a Muslim identity.

Individual identity was influenced by the person's perceptions and self-understandings, and it produced self-presentations. Each of these processes were reflected on the level of interaction, which then, according to the model of analysis I have used, functioned in relation to social structures. In the Macedonian post-socialist and transformative societal circumstances, Albanian women and their religiosity, among other societal aspects, were often thought to be situated between the poles of modernisation and tradition. However, to observe Islam only through this dichotomy is unlikely to explain Islamic religiosity comprehensively, nor all the decisions made regarding Islam. In this chapter, it has been demonstrated that Islam played an important role for the Albanian women also at this level, which did not necessarily manifest itself on the 'outside', in a group or in interaction with others, but was of a more internal, convictional nature and probably represented the more stable and enduring aspects of one's identity. The Albanian women spoke, for instance, about moral values, Islamic behaviour, experiences related to their own body in relation to Islamic clothing and cleanliness, but also about devotion, and more emotionally-tied aspects of their faith.

All the Albanian women, who were from different generations and different backgrounds, considered at least some aspects of Islam to be important in some areas of their life. Hence, Islam clearly was a significant factor in the women's lives and in their identity construction. The Islamic image of the human being was, in the Albanian women's experiences, very positive, even noble, something which could support their self-esteem as Muslims and persons. The view that knowledge of Islam had increased the women's experience of responsibility and religious devotion could be a sign of an increased and wider Islamic revival, or be related to more personal choices. The emphasis placed on Islamic behaviour, the status of the Prophet Muhammad and the meaning of life in the Hereafter expressed by many of the women could be interpreted as following the more reformist tones of contemporary Islam. These perceptions however often also belong to the Islamic way of living and conviction at more general level. It could be assumed that the implied strivings to return to the 'Islamic roots', to the Qur'an, the Sunna and the time of the Prophet, which were embedded in the women's answers could be indications of an important rupture in the Islamic tradition in the Republic of Macedonia related to the socialist past and the relatively recently 'liberated' religious life, or it could mean that there currently emerges a reaction towards prevailing Islamic religiosity, which is marked by local cultural features and which some could consider, due to its character, to be 'in need' of reform.

How the Albanian women interpreted Islam in their lives varied. They might see certain issues as unconditional rules or, on the other hand, as contextually linked phenomena. Even one and the same feature could be observed from both of these perspectives. The Albanian women could also distance themselves from features they considered as un-Islamic or in some respects harmful. For instance Nawal, who hoped for thorough changes within her society, such as increased rights for women, thought that possible negative elements in religion could be left 'aside'. Aida said that sometimes life was so busy that there was less space for religious matters, even for those that one normally followed on everyday basis, such as prayer. Aida also considered that Islam according to her way of life did not necessarily manifest itself in a certain kind of clothing, but could be perceived in the way she was with others. Furthermore, she positioned herself relatively critically towards the more extreme Islamic groups, which tended to have stricter interpretations in regards to the religious questions. As a follower of the Bektashi path, Wafa highlighted the believer's active responsibility over his/her life and preferred it if somebody gave her

guidance in religious matters even though she appreciated living out her religiosity freely. Wafa had negative views about the Sunni Muslims and considered that their ways of encouraging women to cover themselves and stay within the walls of the house was not normal, but rather dehumanizing. Furthermore, she wished that people would be more open-minded and that there would be more acceptance and space for different ways to believe in the Republic of Macedonia, such as going to the tekke to light a candle or going to a mosque to pray.

The aspects that the Albanian women highlighted as significant in their lives showed that religion had its place among their three most important things and that the Muslim identity was highly valued among the different identities the women had. Muslim identity could be perceived as facilitating the functions of everyday life, or as supporting the women's development as persons. Also, Islam and Islamic precepts might offer the women sources of pleasure and give content to their lives. Their Albanian identity was sometimes in contradiction with their Muslim identity, and the women might have appreciated one of them more. Muslim identity could be seen as protecting or defending the women from prevailing cultural norms. The women defined themselves religiously as predominantly Muslims and believers, but also used other terms to describe their religious identities. Islam could be seen at this individual level as having an emotional dimension, being a setter of expectations or a way to success. Some of the women could see a connection between their own way of being religious and that of their parents or family. However, a certain kind of religious background did not necessarily produce certain kinds of religious identities. Some of the women had chosen the Bektashi path, for instance, despite their Sunni background, or they might be less religious than the generations of their parents.

The Albanian women saw and understood Islamic regulations and recommendations in different ways. Many of them wanted to deepen their devotion to Islam, while some considered that adapting their religious identities and practices to the course of everyday life was enough of a way to express a religious identity. The women also doubted sometimes that expressing one's religious identity publicly would be welcomed in a predominantly non-Muslim environment and such an expression could have negative repercussions, influencing negatively the marks given at the university, for example, or reducing their chances of getting work. There were also issues that might still be challenging for an Albanian woman, such as leaving the sphere of the household, interactions between men and women,

women's access to education, the possible views of family members and their interventions regarding women's clothing and choices related to their religious lives. In other words, the religious identities of the Albanian women might be exposed to social pressure within the Albanian community and the issues experienced as limiting the women were sometimes justified not only by Islam, but also by the cultural tradition.

Questions related to clothing and the veil were among those related to the Albanian women's identities as Muslims and women, and particularly the Islamic headscarf seemed to have many meanings. Few of the women interviewed were wearing one, while some others did not consider it necessary or saw it as a symbol of certain kind of backwardness, particularly if it took more extreme forms than the traditional Islamic way of dressing that could be met in the Republic of Macedonia. The Islamic scarf could be perceived as a traditional way of dressing, as an identity-related stance, as a convictional calling, or as a personal choice. It was also claimed to be sometimes an economically motivated manifestation of Muslim identity.

When it came to religious role models, the Albanian women's views could show more clearly their religious background or orientation. This was due to the emphasis the Sunnites tended to put on a direct relationship with God and the more favourable positioning of the Bek-tashis to some kind of an intermediary in this relationship. Very few of the Islamic religious models mentioned were women. In other words, gender was not a very meaningful category when it came to choosing or being inspired by a certain religious personage. The perceptions that the women had of the life in the Hereafter seemed to mark their religious identities and their behaviour in their social contexts. This belief in life after death is one of the central tenets of Islam. However, there were also doubts expressed concerning the continuity of life after death. In these cases the religious modes of behaviour might have had less importance in the women's everyday lives and identity constructions, as this life was not seen as merely a path to another one.

Many of the Albanian women described how their religiosity and greater emphasis on their religious identities had increased the amount of responsibility they were willing to take and felt for others. This was motivated by the increased amount of knowledge the women had regarding Islam, but also influenced by the circles the women frequented, religious education and religious praxis in itself. Islam and Muslim identity could be many things for the women; it could

offer stability in change, a wider framework of reference that gathered all other aspects of life and was not limited by time or space. Being a Muslim and constructing a Muslim identity seemed to presuppose actions on the part of the believer and the inner Islamic ideals and religious identities were enacted in the social environment. The women also described their lives according to Islam, and thus their religious identities, in a range of emotionally positive terms.

The Albanian women could perceive their religious identities as making possible a striving towards certain kind of goal in the worldly life, or as guaranteeing an absolute freedom in relation to God. In the interviews some thoughts were also elaborated on the relationship between Islam as such and 'what Muslims do'. The women saw a difference between these two and could not believe that all the actions of Muslims necessarily agreed with Islamic ideals or expressed Muslim identity in a way they could recognize. The Albanian women also distanced themselves from certain ways of functioning as something that a Muslim should not do, such as wearing clothing which was too revealing, doing something that was haram, excessive religious extremism, not following religious praxis and devotional rites, lying, or being ignorant about Islam. Through their own interpretations and perceptions the women applied the Islamic way of life in a manner that they found meaningful in their lives, while at the same time sometimes leaving aside even the often assumed (particularly outside the Muslim community) 'basic expectations' of being a Muslim, such as praying, fasting or specific clothing. However, as I have discussed above, Islamic recommendations and rules regarding various acts are placed in different categories, which are not necessarily at all times acknowledged by the believer herself, but are instead more emphasized in relation to culturally, socially and societally relevant factors.

Outsiders generally tend to have a negative view of Islam's relation to freedom. The question nevertheless remains whether this picture is accurate or not. Islamic behaviour and law include rules and expectations, but how they are followed and implemented depends on the believer and can therefore take various forms. Were the Albanian women I interviewed free to make decisions concerning their religiousities and their religious identities? I would say that most of the time, yes, they were. However in the material there were also signs and testimonies of other kinds of experiences and I know from the situations in the field and the issues I came across in my research that the lives of women, and also of men, could in certain contexts be more dictated by cultural norms than the person's free will. However, these

cases should of course be examined contextually. Furthermore, Islam, or any other religion, when a social pressure dictates it, is most likely experienced as something negative, but when representing the individual's free choice it can become a positive force. The Albanian women very often were able to give their own interpretations of what was important for their personal Islamic religiosity and their Muslim identity. Furthermore, it can be observed that the women could talk about Islam on many levels, such as a more general level or a theological level or at the level of orthopraxy. In addition there are various kinds of Muslim women, who each practise their religion differently. As Nawal concluded:

*Nawal: Every [...] personality has a right to choose own religion [...] every [...] personality has the right too have its own principles [...] you know, and aa if I am, if I am a Muslim, it doesn't mean that I would be going to behave like some other Muslim woman you know [...] I can be different.*

*(Nawal, 35 years old, city dweller)*

## 8 Conclusions

This ethnographic study in the field of comparative religion has focused on identity constructions of Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia and the significance given to Islam within it. In this study I presented the characteristics of and nuances in, what might be described as a mosaic of Albanian women's religiosities and I have also studied the multifaceted, mosaic-like meanings of Islam as an element of identity construction among Albanian Muslim women in the present day Republic of Macedonia. My study serves a hermeneutic and qualitative approach in combination with an ethnography of religion and social psychological identity theory. In this eighth chapter I will first present a summary of the study in order to engage in a more nuanced discussion concerning the three main analytical levels; the societal level, the level of interaction and the individual level, which I have applied in my thesis. In the final part I will address some methodological reflections, as well as some thoughts about further research the field of study offers.

The qualitative material I gathered for the study in the course of the fieldwork consisted of twenty-two in-depth interviews and a field diary based on my participant observation. Of the interviews, nineteen were conducted with women and three with other reference persons who knew well the Islamic field of the Republic of Macedonia. I conducted some interviews (14) with the assistance of an interpreter and some (8) without. In the interviews with the women I followed the structure of the questionnaire used. Interviews with the three reference persons had a freer structure. The main working languages in the interviews were Albanian and English. One interview was answered by email. The field diary and interviews with the reference persons functioned as support as I contextualized the interviews I had conducted with the women. They also gave access to more detailed information regarding Islam, Islamic religious life and social and societal dimensions of life in the Republic of Macedonia.

As instruments for the analysis of the qualitative material and for articulation of the dialogic relationship that the researcher and the material have, I have relied on a hermeneutical approach and reflexivity. In this study this has meant that the interviews were conducted and analyzed against the background of many contextual aspects that included, in addition to Islamic and other religious features, also historical, economic, political and other societally relevant dimensions. From a more chronological perspective I examined the Macedonian context



particularly in the light of the construction of national and religious identities. Pre-existing research regarding Albanian Muslim women and their religious lives and identities in the Republic of Macedonia is modest in quantity. Thus, this study, which aims at elucidating the everyday lives and religiosities of the Muslim women, offers relatively fresh angle to these women's Balkan realities and identity construction as a component of them.

The concept of identity was at the core of study's theoretical framework. The idea of perceiving one's identity as a crossroads of different elements made different identities such as national, ethnic, gender and Muslim identities, meaningful as a background to my study as well as for the analysis of the material. These concepts helped me as I worked with the material and enabled me to see it in a more nuanced way. The analyses of the interview material were based on an adapted three-level social psychological model introduced by Côté and Levine (2002) and Verkuyten (2006). At the societal level of the study (Chapter Five) I observed particularly the political, cultural, ideological and economic features that have been and were a part of Macedonian society and have played a role in Albanian women's identity construction as well as Islam's place within it. I located some of the questions related to the more public and social dimensions of Islam in women's religiosities at this societal level. The rest of them I examined more closely at the level of interaction.

The societal transition of the Republic of Macedonia has fractured Islam in the country and increased the Albanian women's opportunities to create different kinds of Muslim identities, positioning their identities differently towards a new Islamic diversity. Macedonian Islam has, in addition to the traditional presence of Sunni Islam and tarikat networks, been enriched by foreign Islamic influences, which the women had different opinions of. The emergence of new Islamic groups and transitional changes in the Islamic structures have also furthered negotiations of power and hierarchy within the Macedonian Muslim community. The women said that the liberation of Islamic religious life has led into a religious revival, which manifested itself for example in an increase in religious practice and seeking of knowledge regarding Islam. The way the women spoke about their religiosities implied that they also participated in this revival to some extent. History writing and its different interpretations had had an important impact on the general societal climate of attitudes. The weight of history and the country's political situation could put the Muslim, and the cultural, identities of the women into an inferior position and this

could have a role in how the women appreciated their identities – if they engaged to them or preferred to place less emphasis on them. Albanian nationalism in the Republic of Macedonia seemed to remain relatively unreligious, even though the women also saw links between politics and religion. The Albanian cultural tradition had a more entangled relationship with Islam and the women could point out differences in cultural and religious ways of functioning and might have preferred their religious identities to the cultural one.

Religious praxis had significance as an important part of women's identity construction as Muslims. Macedonian society offered them some opportunities to materialize their religiosities and these opportunities had increased to some extent, but the women still had hopes that more would be done, for instance in the domains of religious education, availability of Islamic spaces for religious practice and relative to general attitudes towards Muslims, so that the women could feel their religious identities to be more secure and accepted by the surrounding environment. The Albanian women's religiosities took more visible forms and space in the public sphere and could manifest for example in behaviour, clothing, dietary questions and religious expressions in speech as manifestations of their religious identities. The significance of Islam as a factor which defined the women's places in society seemed to be less accentuated than their ethnic or cultural identity. However, the women also described about experiences of otherness, which were based on their religious, but also other, identities. The Albanian women wished that many things in Macedonian society would change, so that their freedoms and rights would be implemented, and their religious identities, but also cultural or ethnic identities would not be sources of unequal treatment or prejudices. However, some women also felt that they as Muslims were like anybody else in the society. That is, this particular religious identity did not necessarily evoke discriminatory responses.

At the level of interaction, discussed in Chapter Six, the dynamics of concrete everyday contacts were observed as well as how the emergence and the maintenance of identity manifested in these processes of interaction and how identity was negotiated. Islam in the Republic of Macedonia was seen by the Albanian women as both being fragmented and bestowing unity. Macedonian Islam was becoming more plural and this led to a range of different reactions, both defensive and approving, often depending on how the women interviewed saw themselves in relation to other Islamic groups. Muslim identities, both the women's and the others', and the ways of enacting them were,

according to the women, to some extent related also to gender, generations and different local contexts. Older generations and village environments could be perceived as more conservative, but there were exceptions in these perceptions and contradictory opinions as well. Gender identity seemed to be given some emphasis as well, as a category that divided Islamic religiosity. However, the Albanian women often described these differences as not so accentuated and were rather inclined to underline the equality of all in Islam. Islamic religiosity had an important social dimension, particularly when religious identity was enacted through religious celebrations and rites of transition. It was also involved in important moral choices and guidelines in the women's lives and was meaningful for their identities as, for instance, family members, workers, patients, friends and wives.

At the individual level (Chapter Seven) I placed more personal and often more private ways of living according to Islam. I also discussed the central elements of the religiosities and religious identities that the women brought up through their experiences and impressions as Muslims. These more internally directed ways of being a Muslim woman could be linked to the women's moral values, the Islamic code of behaviour, their clothing and the responsibilities the women had increasingly felt as their knowledge concerning Islam had grown. All of these could become a part of the public and social sphere, as they could influence the Albanian women's agency in societal and social contexts. I also elaborated on the interplay between the concepts of faith, love, gratitude and purity in the construction of the women's religious identities, and observed more closely the women's perceptions of Islamic role models, of the Islamic image of human being and that of the life in the Hereafter. How the women positioned themselves towards the interplay of these elements could illustrate their religious identities and religiosities as Muslims belonging to different groups, or as believers articulating their identities differently in the surrounding social sphere. In the everyday life religious conviction had an impact from within, as it emphasized particularly individual choices related to values and moral guidelines. In everyday contexts Islam was also often present in a manner that permeated the lives of the women as one of the most important aspects of their identities. The cornerstones of the faith embodied diversity as the women mentioned belief in one God, for instance, as well as good behaviour towards others, observing Islamic recommendations, love, gratefulness and cleanliness. The women also discussed different ways of interpreting, understanding, practising and perceiving Islam and made a distinc-

tion between Islam as an ideal and ‘what Muslims do’ as often practical or human-related interpretations of the ideal.

It could be observed that Islam and religious identities were meaningful to the Albanian women’s identity constructions at all of the three levels. Different aspects of the identity were however emphasized in varying ways at the analytical levels in the women’s answers. It seemed that at the societal level the Albanian cultural, ethnic or national identity was more meaningful than at the other two analytical levels. Gender identity for its part was particularly significant at the level of interaction, and at the individual level the religious identity seemed to be the most emphasized aspect. Even though these perceptions are fluid and have permeable boundaries – that is, they should not be seen as exclusive and entirely unconditional – these different emphases could be distinguished in the material.

In the following I will engage in a discussion about the results of my analysis. In the first subsection I will elaborate on the affect of societal transition on the Albanian women’s identities, and in the second on the interactional relation of Islam and Albanian women’s identities. Thirdly I discuss the mosaic of the Albanian women’s more personal ways to living according to Islam and of forming Muslim identities.

### **Albanian Women’s Identities in Societal Transition**

*Pour que le passé devienne passé, il ne suffit pas que le temps passe.  
Pour qu’une société puisse tracer une frontière entre son aujourd’hui  
et son hier, il faut qu’elle ait de ce côté-ci de l’hypothétique frontière de  
quoi asseoir sa dignité, son respect d’elle-même, son identité[.]*  
(Maalouf 2009, 250)

In the Republic of Macedonia, Albanian women are faced with challenges of multiple belonging as they define their identities in relation to questions of citizenship, nationality, cultural tradition and ethnic and religious groups. These relations are furthermore emphasized due to the minority and majority positions that the different groups in Macedonian society have. The Albanians live in the Republic of Macedonia as a minority, but are a part of the Albanian nation, which spreads across the territories of several states. Thus, the Albanian identities in the Republic of Macedonia are also formed to some extent in relation to the attitudes of the neighbouring countries, Albanian (regional) cultural traditions and other nations. Furthermore these identities find themselves exposed to the pressure, challenges and

opportunities caused and created by possible memberships of the EU and NATO. The collectively experienced tensions and schisms can strengthen the meaning given to different social identities against the aspects that threaten them, or seem to. Collective values and expectations can also function as a tool to impose control over specific things within a certain community. Features that the women interviewed brought up in their narratives included emphasizing their Albanian identities, a poor reception of their Muslim identities and expectations that social pressures might impose on them as Muslim or Albanian women or both.

In the multicultural, multiethnic and multiconfessional Macedonian societal context, the Albanian women seemed to organize their identities predominantly according to linguistic (or ethnic) and religious belonging, but also by features such as gender, generation, or the Islamic group they belonged to. Islam in the Republic of Macedonia is often also defined in relation to (Orthodox) Christianity and in this constellation the Muslims find themselves in a somewhat inferior position. Antagonism between Macedonian and Albanian populations tends to find ground first on an ethnic basis and religious dimensions can be used to reinforce this affect. As a result of the developments related to societal transition of the country, particularly in the legislative, economic and educational domains, Islam has gained more space and importance in Macedonian society. Because of their increasing importance, Islam and Islamic influences can be perceived as results, but also as factors of the societal transition.

The practice of identifying one state as the territory of one nation was adopted in the Balkan states in a particularly emphatic manner after the Second World War. Thereafter people living within the borders of one state automatically formed a unity of citizens. A nationality existed only through its 'own state', and the existence of the state presupposed nationality. This led to a situation in the socialist Yugoslavia where to be a Yugoslav was practically the only way to unite the ethnically, culturally and nationally diverse inhabitants. (Cf. Lehti 1999b) However, an increase of national awareness among the populations

and a three-tier system of national rights introduced by the Yugoslav politics defined the relations and borders between groups and communities, and strengthened national identities. From an Albanian perspective, leaving behind the Ottoman system, which was more supportive to a religious identity than to a national identity, and to become subject to different administrative systems in which national identity received more emphasis, has most probably been a cause of tensions within the process of identity construction, as the Albanians were predominantly Muslims (and represented a minority) and their position therefore changed drastically. In Serbia, the SHS, the Royal and the Socialist Yugoslavias and in the Republic of Macedonia, the Albanians lived, and live, as a minority. In the political alignments of the first Yugoslavia an emphasis was placed on the unifying religious identity of all the Muslims, gathered under a Slavic leadership, and in the second Yugoslavia on the national identities dominated by the position the nations of Yugoslavia, which were all Slavic, had. However, being neither Christian nor Slav the experience of otherness for the Albanians was most likely underlined within the structures of all these states. It also was sometimes a political reality, when measures were taken against Albanian national(ist) strivings.

In Macedonian society, economic and political power are often intertwined, and due to the prevailing general opinion that power relationships are unclear and characterized by corruption, people find alternative ways of functioning in a fragile society. The unreliable power structures limit people's chances of acting as responsible citizens and can make them adopt the victim role instead of carrying out their responsibilities. The current societal circumstances are evidently partly results of historical developments and power struggles influenced by political powers from the outside, but these do not cancel out the responsibilities of the citizens, or justify passive self-pity. People may also feel limited by ethnic, confessional and class differences, family relationships, cultural or religious traditions, visa restrictions and difficult economic situations they might find themselves in. Therefore the feeling of control and hoped for improvement of living conditions is often sought in nationalist ideologies, economic support sent from abroad by other family members, grey market businesses and corruption of various sorts. While bypassing the official, unreliable administrative system people are actually creating another that functions in parallel and is often based on connections, kinships and friendships. (Cf. Simić 1999, 15–16) One person poignantly encapsulated this: 'Macedonia is not the state of corruption, it is the state of connection'. If everything can be arranged through networking, what are laws

needed for? By referring to this feature of the society, I wish to claim that these developments undermine and fragment Macedonian society and also create more compartmentalized and hardened identities, and widening the splits and the prevailing distrust between different groups, as their common civic identities, which the state should represent, remain weak. However, attempts to divide in a clear-cut manner the long historical cultural heritage that has developed and intertwined under the periods of different empires and states in the current circumstances, in order to create 'pure' national identities, simply seems to be the art of dividing the impossible.

Against this background it is not surprising that Islamic religiosity in the Republic of Macedonia is also going through a period of transformation. More intensive connection with the external Islamic world, the liberation and revival of the religious life and various negotiations and antagonisms between different groups as to their role and status within society have rendered also the Islamic religious field more diverse. For the Albanian women interviewed, this seems to have meant that there have emerged simultaneously different ways to live according to Islam and to express Islam in everyday life. The Republic of Macedonia belongs to that area where the *tarikats* have traditionally been present in parallel with the more dominant Sunni Islam belonging to the Hanafi school of law. In addition to this, new, often external, influences have entered the Islamic religious field, for example in the form of diverse organizations. Alongside the traditional 'Islam of the mosque' and the 'Islam of the *tekke*' have also emerged the 'Islam of the reform' and the 'liberal Islam'. These developments have fragmented the Islamic field, within which can currently be found a spectrum of different positions taken and emphasis given on questions concerning Islam.

It can be stated that when placing Islam in the Macedonian societal context, the historical dimension plays a role, as it defines relations between different groups (Muslims–Christians; Albanians–other Muslims; Albanians–Macedonians) through their collective memories, which influences the climate of attitudes. As Maalouf points out in the citation above, history cannot become history and be left behind, if the present is not offering enough support for the construction of a societal identity that one could really appreciate. Albanian nationalism tends to be characterized as relatively secular, however in the Republic of Macedonia there are occasionally signs that Islam and nationalism may intertwine. Nonetheless, Islam was also described by one of the interviewed women as an element that could tone down nation-

alist thinking. The relation between the Albanian cultural traditions and Islam was a more complex one and this also manifested in the interview material. Islam was a part of the culture, but simultaneously it in a certain manner overlapped and seemed to, for instance, enlarge the Albanian women's sphere and also connected Muslims to a wider community. In other words, Islam could function as both a support to the traditional cultural way of living and in a certain sense be an objection to it. Furthermore, the Islamic revival has increased Islamic organizational plurality, which also articulates the relations between different, particularly Islamic, groups (Sunnites–Bektashis–other Islamic groups) and gives more choices to the Muslims in the identification processes. This revival has facilitated access to information on Islam in terms of various publications, and to some extent increased the supply of Islamic education. It has also influenced Islam's visibility in the public sphere as many funds directed to the restoration and construction of mosques have been received from abroad, often from Islamic sources.

The transformation of Islamic religiosity seemed to some extent to affect the Albanian women as societal agents. As Muslims they had experiences and held opinions of both participating fully to the functioning of the society, but as also of being to some extent marginalized, for instance because of their clothing, the diet they as Muslims followed or due to the prejudices of others. The women expressed hopes that many religiously important Islamic aspects in Macedonian society would change, for instance the modest quantity and level of religious education, the modest number of mosques and the freedom of religion, which they experienced as not properly implemented. Also other kinds of societal factors could have an impact on the emphasis given to religious identity, such as uncertain economic circumstances, corruption and not satisfactory implementation of some other freedoms and rights.

The visibility of the Muslim women's religiosity in the public sphere could be perceived in terms of women's presence in the public spaces of Islamic religious praxis and education, women's clothing and behaviour. The Albanian women's religiosity has also become more important in the public sphere, as the women's interest in Islam tends to increase and their knowledge of religion, a domain previously in a more clear-cut manner reserved for men, challenges some traditional ways of functioning. The women interviewed elaborated also on the transition the Albanian woman had experienced in recent decades. In the current circumstances her opportunities to be educated, work and



lead a more independent life had improved. Instead of considering Islam as limiting women in these walks of life, it could be seen as a supportive force. Previously this, according to the women and other people I met in the field, had been the other way round; women's difficult access for example to education and employment could have been justified in terms of Islamic teachings.

The impact the societal circumstances have on the identities, religiosity and religious praxis of the Albanian women runs in two directions, on two levels. On the one hand the society seems to negotiate with the Muslims, and with the Muslim women, so that they can express their religiosity more freely in public, for example in the media, holiday scheduling, clothing. Despite this, on the other hand, the Muslims often have the feeling of being marginalized in the predominantly Christian, even though secular, society. Another issue is that the societal circumstances tend to evoke particularly two kinds of reactions among the Muslim women, either more emphasis is put on their Muslim identities or there is a withdrawal from them, to a certain extent due to practical reasons or other motivations.

### **Interactional Relation of Islam and Albanian Women's Identities**

The status and the role of an Albanian woman has undergone changes during recent years and if the status of a woman alters, so will the family structures. Islamic principles are often interpreted as supportive to women's economic independency and education. As the interviewees remarked, these have at least previously been somewhat difficult for Albanian women to access. In this way Islam can support Albanian women to gain more space, but depending on the interpretation of Islam used or the Islamic tradition, it might also function as a limiting factor in the women's lives. The interpreters of the Qur'an or the Sunna and the Islamic scholars have until recently been predominantly men, for example, and many dimensions of Islamic religious practice often still remain dominated by men in the Republic of Macedonia as elsewhere. Furthermore, according to Todorovska (2009), the current situation in Macedonian society shows that the implementation of laws to improve the position of the women in society generally progresses with considerable difficulty, or is not completed. In her view this can be explained by errors in terms of measures and mechanisms for their proper application, as well as by a lack of ap-

appropriate sanctions for non-compliance and of enforcement of legal provisions.<sup>114</sup>

The diverse aspects of Islam, both local and global, and their manifestations in the everyday contexts in which the women lived could be perceived as an empowering element for the women within the Albanian community. Because the women interested in and devoted to religious life in different ways might gain a position in which they know more about religion and its teachings, regarding for instance Muslim women and their rights and opportunities – whereas men for their part might sometimes be more informed concerning these issues by virtue of the more practical or traditional aspects of their lifestyles. Furthermore, Albanian women who practise Islam and eventually wish to express this, for example by what they wear, seem to enjoy a certain respect within their community or society.

These empowering dimensions are, however, also connected to a greater complexity, which needs to be addressed. In the patriarchal tradition which prevails in the western Balkans, women are often expected to be responsible for transmitting the tradition and the children's upbringing and it can be experienced as threatening when ideas of change are advanced within the basic unit of the society, the family. This is often due to the attitudes which value loyalty to tradition and have negative perceptions of possible modifications and changes. This complexity of the social (and also the societal) framework seems to include diverse types of negotiations and reflections in the processes of identity construction among the women interviewed. They could point out differences in cultural and religious modes of life, and could appreciate the latter more. Some also thought that one did not have to accept the negative features one's religion might have, but instead think for oneself and articulate Islam more personally. The women also held opinions that divisions and differences manifest in the Islamic religious life were in general based on incorrect interpretations and incomplete information concerning that what exactly

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<sup>114</sup> In addition to their higher illiteracy rate, women earned a third of the income in the country (Todorovska 2009). The unemployment rate of the women was 32,8% and men's 31,8% in 2009 (State Statistical Office c, 30). In 2012 the unemployment rate for the whole population was 31,6% (State Statistical Office's website, accessed 9 July 2012)

was taught in the Qur'an. Islamic conviction was often perceived as bestowing rights on the women rather than as a limiting element. And the Albanian women seemed to appreciate more their religious than their cultural identities, as they could experience them as women more supportive and maybe even more righteous. This can indicate that Islam in a higher degree was understood as separate in relation to cultural manifestations.

Plurality marks the Islamic field in the Republic of Macedonia as the Muslims speak various mother tongues, belong to different Islamic groups, and read different religious literature and publications. The contacts between these groups are not at all times unproblematic and society seems to pay less attention to minorities and their statuses. We could say that Islam in the Republic of Macedonia, as the Albanian women described it, is both shared and divided in terms of Islamic organizations, gender, generations, environments, rites of transition and Islamic celebrations. The rites of transition and Islamic celebrations were important to the women, and in their descriptions the roles the different genders performed differed slightly when these occasions were celebrated. Gender identity as an analytical category made a difference in the religious praxis as well as to some extent on a more general level. However, the emphasis placed on it by the women was not particularly accentuated in all contexts.

In addition to celebratory events Islam was perceptibly linked to rites of transition: thus Islam was from the women's point of view an inherent part of the local culture and a way of life. Furthermore the women were of the opinion that generational and social environments had an influence on the Muslim identities and ways of living according to Islam, even though they observed that certain Islamic aspects tended to endure over time. However the women's views on this were not uniform. For example while one considered people in the villages to be more religiously fanatical, another could claim that Islam was not that much practised in the village environment in which she lived. Also, it was asserted that the young did not respect Islam, but also that the young actually were more informed about Islam. Furthermore, the Muslim way of behaving when choosing a spouse or a job, visiting a doctor or voting, was meaningful to some of the Albanian women. Islamic behaviour could also colour family relationships and relationships with other people.

### **The Mosaic of the Albanian Women's Islam**

Even though it is often thought that Islam and the Islamic world are locked in a monolithic, immutable set of customs and traditions, it has been obvious throughout this study that the Albanian Muslim women are, each one of them, different, and they express their Islamic religiosities and religious identities in a variety of ways. Some of these ways are shared and intertwine with others' perceptions; others are more personal and individual. It was remarked in the interviews, for instance, that even though one might not 'look like' a Muslim, a person nevertheless could have deep knowledge of Islam. Thus, one should not jump to hasty conclusions about Muslim's religiosity just on the basis of looks and clothing only. The Albanian women applied many meanings to the Islamic way of life and their religious identities as Muslims. Islam could offer structure and content in life, but it could also be used to limit the women and reduce their opportunities in some aspects, for example when it came to expectations imposed by social pressure. However, some of the women stated that by contrast with often prevailing opinions, Muslim women may take up active roles, take care of themselves without being dependent on the man, raise their children and 'to be whatever they wanted to be'. Thus, the women could not perceive of Islam or having a Muslim identity as a woman, as a set of conditions which would only somehow reduce woman's possibilities and perspectives.

The individual level of analysis revealed some of the more dogmatic and theological aspects of the Albanian women's religiosity and some of the reasons behind their choices in religiously linked issues. The family background could have an impact on the women's religious identities when, for instance, it was multiconfessional, or well educated, or the family had particularly wished to transmit its religious traditions. However, the women could also see these influences reflexively and could come to their own conclusions concerning religious issues. Also, being a Muslim was of great importance to most of the women and their religious identities and religiosities were not linked to a certain time or space. The Islamic code of behaviour and how it was implemented in the women's lives was a varying, but often meaningful way of enacting a religious identity. When asked about the most indispensable elements in their faith the social dimension, which included behavioural aspects, was significant. The women also emphasized the meaning of faith itself, gratitude, love and purity in their religious conviction. The positive view of a human being, the life in the Hereafter and Islamic religious role models often functioned as

motivations and sources of inspiration for the women in their religious practice. Also, the religious role models the women had could reveal more about their religious backgrounds and the context they came from. Many of the women stated furthermore that their religiosity and the importance of Islam in their lives had increased over the years. The Albanian women's religious identities, how the women expressed them and what kinds of feelings they had regarding them, were also linked to the images and attitudes that the environment placed on their identities as Muslims and women.

Different identities become meaningful depending on with whom we are in contact. In the Republic of Macedonia, Albanians are in continuous interaction with different parts of the Macedonian society, which is, linguistically and religiously, predominantly different from theirs. This most probably means that the parts of identity related to language and religion, are emphasized more, as the differences are 'met' and enacted in a wide range of societal contexts every day. However, the more inwardly directed ways of living of the various communities that aim at isolation might reduce these contacts. The coexistence of different communities has, nevertheless, been an everyday reality in this region for centuries. The relatively fragile economic situation and the frustrations related to it, as well as level of education could play a role in how religious issues were in general understood and on the weight and meaning given to Islam in identity construction. These societal circumstances might for example lead into more extreme or strict solutions and interpretations in questions linked to religious life, as people search for order in chaos or sometimes even economic advantage through their religiously linked actions. Simultaneously, the increasing influences of Westernization and globalisation can result in people distancing themselves from religious issues, as being religious, or too religious, can be understood as a sign of backwardness. Having a higher level of education gives greater opportunities to reflect on the personal choices also regarding the Islamic religious practices and religious identities.

Because the diverse societal aspects of the Balkan societies are often discussed in many more political analyses, in this study I have aimed at illustrating the Albanian women's versions of how they experienced these societal and social aspects and how these might be linked to their religiosities and religious identities as Muslims and women. The key conclusions and findings of this study are multidimensional and permeate the social psychological model of analysis. As being both a collective and individual factor Islam is comprehensively a

part of the lives of Albanian women. The women I interviewed were generally aware of and informed about issues related to Islam and the Islamic way of life. However, they sometimes chose to position themselves differently than the 'mainstream Muslims' concerning these aspects: had different opinions and wanted to know more about Islam. Islam could be perceived as an empowering element in life as it could provide the women with more space in questions regarding education, working life and economic independence than the Albanian cultural tradition did. Islam could also function as a limiting factor when it was used to justify matters related to, for example, women's clothing and their opportunities to leave the household. Furthermore, Islam seemed to represent another set of rules, which sometimes took the place previously given to cultural tradition. It is important that the choices to accept these rules and live according to them were perceived in most of the cases positively by the women interviewed, however not by all of them. Even though some of the women also expressed dissatisfaction regarding the Islamic way of life in the Republic of Macedonia and the more strict or other Islamic interpretations, Islam seemed in most of the cases to be a conscious choice in the identity construction among the women I spoke to. Thus, it was much more an intellectual choice than a cultural convention, to which they just would have been exposed and would have followed without questioning it.

## **Methodological Reflections**

At the end of a research process that has lasted seven years, I can say that I very much agree with Behar when she states 'that anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore' (Behar 1996, 177). Research work happens in interaction with the researcher's person and s/he influences its outcome. It also leaves traces on the researcher's person. This interaction evidently includes the emotions Behar so eagerly encourages us to include in the research process. In my fieldwork emotions were many times in the foreground. When people speak about religion and religiosity, issues that come up are often emotionally rooted. Emotional involvement played a role even in the choices I made as to the topic of the thesis. The time that I spend in the field was also emotionally nuanced, both in positive and in negative sense, and emotions marked in multidimensional ways the experiences I had and the things that I observed.

It can of course be questioned how did all these emotional aspects of the work influence the outcome and the results of the study? Did they help or hinder the access to a dialogue with the material and the field? I would say that emotions on many occasions made possible a deeper connection with the interviewees' and other people's narratives regarding their religious and other experiences, but they also rendered the work more challenging as the stories were many, and they were all different. I found it particularly demanding to observe the societal context from an angle which would comprise all the views and demonstrate the complexity of the situation without being trapped into a side taking of some kind. Also, my opportunities to connect to the informants' narratives were linked to my person and my own experiences. In other words, in my case the points of contact could more easily be found on the side of values and religious experiences than in the women's descriptions of the more cultural or context related issues. I would however claim however that despite the criticism that this kind of working methods can be exposed to, the concrete contact with the people gave access to information that in Balkan studies is rarely in the foreground.

The type and style of the material used can of course be discussed, particularly because of its 'torn' nature. The material gathered through interviewing, and through several interpreters, did not make an easy access to very detailed or precise information at all times self-evident. Also, the modest quantity of literary sources regarding the Muslim Albanian women's religiosity in the Republic of Macedonia sometimes presented a challenge. In my interpretations of the material, I strove to make the women speak for themselves as much as possible through the interview citations. It might have had an influence on how the interviewees were perceived by the readers. However, my opinion is that using this type of reference technique more effectively preserved the authenticity of the material. Furthermore, my strivings to give the material a good contextual basis through my own observations in the field, in addition to literature and other type of data, were aims to support more thorough interpretations of the interviews' contents, but also simultaneously to uphold the image given of the informants as independent agents, not only as products of historical developments and the contexts they live in. The dialogue that went on between the material and me was a reciprocal continuum of exchange that continuously deepened the way I saw my material and crystallized different themes that I could perceive in it. The narratives of the interviewees reflected the societal and social interplay, which I could place with the help of other material used. Contextualization and concrete contact

with the people complemented each other in a dialogic way: the views of the interviewees made it possible for me to observe different societal and social situations and contexts from a more personal, grassroots perspective.

I could say that technically the methods that I had chosen for the fieldwork provided me with relatively satisfying results. As I did not speak the mother tongue of my informants, or that of my field in a larger sense, working with an interpreter was an inevitable choice. Due to the fact that interpreting demands time, it was very rewarding to work with a thematically structured questionnaire. It framed the use of time, structured the themes and let the discussion flow further on quite freely and naturally. It also facilitated the gathering of some more statistical details, which then could additionally support getting a better view of different aspects of religiosities or the lives of Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia and also help to explain the details related to Islam and identity. However, in order to receive more precise and more detailed answers, I guess more time in the field would have been needed. The question nonetheless is, is there ever enough time? Furthermore this facet of the work and the wishes related to it, as I mentioned in Chapter Four, were linked to and limited by more practical reasons.

Regarding the theoretical model of the analysis, I might say that its benefit was that it made possible to expose many nuances of meaning in the interview material. On the other hand the three analytical levels were not exhaustively separated from each other; rather, they overlapped and intertwined to some extent, something that challenged me when placing certain phenomena into a particular category and level. However, the theoretical model was helpful due to its integrative characteristics, which could take into consideration both the individual and the surrounding environment in the process of identity construction. I would say that both analytical and practical methods gave me good tools with which to widen, diversify and fracture the prevailing, particularly Western, image of Islam. The interview contents could also complement Clayer's (2001) three-part analyses of Islam in the Republic of Macedonia. My attempts were furthermore directed to giving such pictures of the society, research field and research topic that could be recognized by the interviewees, particularly by the women, themselves. The contents of an interview and the answers given in the course it, however, obviously always remain as moments or opinions captured in particular time and context. It may therefore



be that the interviewees may sometimes laboriously reinstate them, as they also as persons undergo changes over time.

I have written this thesis 'vulnerably', maintaining an awareness of my own involvement and trying to use my acknowledged subjectivity in order to let the informants speak in as detailed a manner as possible about the societal, social and individual issues that concern them, their religious and other identities, their religiosities and Islam. Vulnerability took expression also in that I was dependent on the help and assistance of others during each of the different work phases. At the critical moments there was always someone – something – that gave me the encouragement I needed to continue. The research process behind this thesis has not been simple: it has actually been a very challenging one. However, I have been filled many times with gratitude as I have shared the experiences of learning about myself and others in the process of transforming the chaos of the topic, as it was in the first place, into an order of some kind.

Pondering at the question of identity in the Macedonian context, the words of Shanta Premawardhana can acquire a new meaning; if only we could find ways of living in a constantly changing borderland-position, we could find ways to resist identification with national, ethnic and linguistic identities, which often are somehow claimed from above. This borderland living 'finds itself in a common solidarity with other human beings, including religious ones struggling to survive and thrive' (Premawardhana 2008). In the Macedonian context it often seems that defining one's identity is predominantly done in terms of the relation the particular ethnic group one belongs to has with others. It would most certainly be beneficial for the Republic of Macedonia to create, alongside its rich mix of ethnically coloured institutions and bodies, systems that would be based on other kind of categorizations and sources of identification, such as local or regional communities. (Cf. Brunnbauer 2002; Lehti 1999b and 2009) However, nowadays even these have become ethnically more monolithic. As Maalouf poignantly puts it, as long as a person's place in a society depends on to which community one belongs to, the divisions between the different communities will only tend to become deeper (Maalouf 1998, 195). Therefore the intermingling and contacts between people from different groups could be encouraged through schooling systems, work places and political parties that would be established on political, and not ethnic, non-corrupt and therefore more trustworthy ideologies. In the multiethnic context there is also a need to understand national independence through other kinds of indicators than each group's

own state, and to detach the notions of nationality and state from each other, as this combination often nourishes strivings for ethnic homogeneity and even ethnic cleansing. With these kinds of transformations there might be opportunities to create a stronger civil society and a trust in the administrative structures, elements that are crucial in unifying, at least to some extent, all the Macedonian citizens in order to establish a more stable Macedonian state.

## **Possibilities for Implementation and Further Research**

This thesis contextualizes Islamic religiosity and the identities of a group of the Albanian women in the Republic of Macedonia and examines them in the light of identity formation and enactment. In recent years Islam has challenged the Western world in many ways. The most intriguing questions have often been related to Muslim women, their life experiences and the opportunities they may or may not have to influence the course of their lives and to make decisions concerning their own religiosity. My hope is that this study has succeeded in answering some of the questions or making the 'already known' answers more nuanced. Religion, in this case Islam, is never an unambiguous subject, which could be exhausted in unequivocal and simple meanings. Islam is related to the human being and in this way it is uniquely enacted by each Muslim. However, religiosity as I have tried to argue in this study is also something which is dynamically formed in relation to the environment, both social and concrete. The field of the study is located in the Balkan Peninsula where various peoples and religious groups have lived together for centuries. This coexistence has sometimes been problematic and tense, but it has also been viable and very much a part of the daily life. This situation has certainly moulded perceptions how the different groups of people have of their identities, as the attitudes and images the groups have of each other influence their identity constructions respectively. Thus, studying identity issues in the Balkan context can, for instance, improve understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a multicultural transitional society and point out domains, which would need to be addressed in order to attain a stronger and more balanced civil society. Identity research may also reduce stereotypes, when it tends to widen the range of meanings given to a certain kind of belonging.

The Balkans in general are an area which is relatively unevenly researched. Among the Balkan states, the Republic of Macedonia is a

country that has not until now attracted much attention on the part of the wider, international scientific community. The Balkan area with its many cultural layers represents a rich and relatively unexplored research field. The research focussing on the women of the Albanian community in the Republic of Macedonia is an area where many items and features are still waiting to be researched in greater detail. The roles the Albanian women's roles have had throughout the varied historical eras of the region, as well as in the contemporary situation is a domain in which research angles will not easily be exhausted. Muslim lives, Islamic traditions and the Islam in the present day Republic of Macedonia offer us a challenge to discover some of Islam's historical roots in Europe and their everyday implementations. Balkan Islam, which dates from the Ottoman period has a rich array of local traditions and multifaceted developments in different Balkan states. Based on my research experiences I could say that more scientific data regarding the existence, emergence and status of various types of Muslim groups amid the Balkan nations would be needed, to better map the diversity of the Balkan religious scenery. Also, to record scientifically the diverse Islamic traditions, rich with local nuances, and to learn more about the religious coexistence that has persisted across the turbulent centuries might bring in new information about Balkan complexity. Albanian women and Islam can offer a multifaceted field of intersectional and multidisciplinary research for both historically and contemporaneously oriented scholars.

## Svensk sammanfattning

Denna religionsvetenskapliga och religionsetnografiska studie, *Islamic Mosaic – Women's Identities in Transition, Albanian Muslim Women in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, granskar i albanska kvinnors identitet och i synnerhet islams betydelse i den. Forskningsfältet finns i sydöstra Europa, på Balkan, i Republiken Makedonien, som var en del av det forna Jugoslavien. Albanerna är en minoritet i Republiken Makedonien och representerar cirka 25% av statens befolkning. Efter den ortodoxa kristendomen är islam det näst största religiösa samfundet i landet och de flesta albaner är muslimer. Inom det islamska samfundet är största delen sunnimuslimer och följer Hanafi-skolans läror, men på det makedoniska territoriet har också under långa tider, ända sedan den ottomanska perioden existerat flera stycken tarikatnätverk. Ytterligare har de nyare islamska rörelserna och ideologierna blivit allt synligare efter statens självständighet år 1991.

Syftet med studien är att presentera de karakteristiska dragen och nyanserna i albanska kvinnornas religiositet och kartlägga vad islam betyder för dem som ett element i identitetsformation och -konstruktion i nutiden. För att samla in det empiriska materialet för studien har jag som metoder använt tematiskt strukturerade djupgående intervjuer och deltagande observation. Intervjuerna med albanska kvinnor är genomförda både med hjälp av en tolk och på engelska. Allt som allt har jag intervjuat nitton kvinnor. Tre andra personer har fungerat som referenspersoner när det gäller islam, det islamiska samfundet och dess specialkaraktär i Republiken Makedonien. De intervjuade albanska kvinnorna hade olika bakgrund och kom från olika åldersgrupper, men intervjumaterialets vikt låg på yngre och mera utbildade kvinnor.

Studiens teoretiska referensram bygger på den socialpsykologiska forskningen som gjorts av Côté och Levine (2002), Liebkind (2006, 2010) och Verkuyten (2006, 2009). Inom den här referensramen betraktas identiteten som formad av och existerande i växelverkan mellan det individuella och det sociala i relation till den omgivande verkligheten. Analytiskt granskar studien identitetsformationen på tre nivåer: den samhällsliga, den interaktiva och den individuella nivån. Den analytiska modellen projicerar tre olika synvinklar på materialet och belyser genom dessa synvinklar islams och den islamska religiositetens betydelse för albanska kvinnorna och deras identiteter.

Tanken om att identifiera en stat som ett territorium för ett folk fick starkare fotfäste på Balkan från och med andra världskriget. Detta

betydde att befolkningen inom en stats gränser automatiskt borde utgöra en medborgerlig helhet; nationalitet existerade bara genom en egen stat och statens existens förutsatte en nationalitet. (Jfr Lehti 1999b) Den ökade nationella medvetenheten samt den politiska utvecklingen i Jugoslavien, där Republiken Makedonien ingick som en federativ enhet, skapade ett tredelat system av nationella rättigheter. På detta sätt introducerades ett nytt element som framhävde gränserna mellan grupperna och samfunden inom samhället. Från albanernas (men också från andras) synvinkel innebar slutet av den ottomanska perioden på Balkan i början av 1900-talet identitetsrelaterade förändringar. Den ottomanska administrationen hade främst fungerat på basis av religiös tillhörighet, men de nya nationalstaterna betonade allt starkare det nationella. För albaner, som mestadels var muslimer, betydde detta högst sannolikt spänningar i identitetsskapandet också på grund av den relativt unga traditionen det litterära språket hade och den albanskspråkiga befolkningens geografiska splittring. I Serbien, i det kungliga Jugoslavien och i det socialistiska Jugoslavien samt i Republiken Makedonien har albanerna levt och lever fortfarande som en minoritet. I det första Jugoslavien var den religiösa identiteten i förgrunden och samlade alla muslimer under slaviskt ledarskap. I den andra Jugoslavien betonade statsbildningen mera den nationella identiteten. Och den position som landets konstitutiva folk som alla var slaviska hade, utövade en dominans på den. På grund av att albanerna varken var slaver eller kristna poängterades och underströks deras olikhet i dessa stater på ett mera framträdande sätt. Detta blev också ibland en politisk verklighet när åtgärder riktades mot albanska nationella eller nationalistiska strävanden.

Den första analytiska nivån, den samhälleliga nivån, granskade det makedoniska samhällets politiska, ideologiska, kulturella och ekonomiska särdrag, samt rådande diskurser och maktställningar. På denna nivå kunde jag påstå att den historiska dimensionen fortfarande spelar en roll i försöken att placera islam i den makedoniska samhälleliga kontexten. Detta har betydelse bland annat när man definierar relationerna mellan olika samhälleliga grupper (muslimer-kristna, albaner-andra muslimer, albaner-makedonier) genom deras kollektiva minnen, som i och för sig har en inverkan på det attitydklimat man lever i. Albansk nationalism karakteriseras som relativt sekulär, men i Republiken Makedonien har man ibland sett tecken på att islam och nationalism flätas samman, ofta på grund av det att de två största etniska grupperna representerar olika religiösa traditioner, något som gör att de etniska skillnaderna förstärks ytterligare med de religiösa särdragen. Förhållandet mellan albansk kulturtradition och islam är

mera komplext, eftersom islam både är en del av kulturen och också överlappar den. Därför kan islam ibland ge albanska kvinnorna mera utrymme, som när det till exempel gäller möjligheter att jobba eller ärva. Men islam har också använts för att begränsa kvinnor till exempel i frågor som har att göra med deras utbildning eller klädsel. Islam kan alltså fungera både som ett stöd för det traditionella kulturella sättet att leva, men också som en protest mot det, såsom albanska kvinnorna påpekade i mina intervjuer. Islams allt starkare ställning i Republiken Makedonien har ökat den islamiska pluralismen, som också tillspetsat förhållandena mellan olika grupper, särskilt mellan de islamska. Detta återupplivande av islam har ökat möjligheterna att få religiös utbildning och förbättrat tillgången till kunskap gällande islam. Det har också medverkat till att islam fått mera inflytande och blivit allt synligare i det offentliga rummet.

Det som jag ovan beskrivit har inneburit att muslimkvinnornas religiositet har blivit synligare. Som exempel kan nämnas albanska kvinnornas närvaro i offentliga islamiska rum för religiös utövning och religiös utbildning samt deras mer och mer varierande islamrelaterade klädsel och beteende. Albanska kvinnornas intresse och kunskaper gällande islam verkar tänja på traditionella kulturella seder, som tenderar att reservera det offentliga rummet för albanska män. I egenkap av samhällliga aktörer hade albanska kvinnorna i denna studie erfarenheter både av att delta fullt ut i samhället, men också av att till en viss mån vara marginaliserade till exempel på grund av sin klädsel, islamsk diet eller fördomar. Kvinnorna önskade att vissa saker som var relaterade till islam skulle förändras i det makedoniska samhället, såsom det anspråkslösa utbudet av religiös utbildning och dess nivå, antalet av moskéer och bönerum samt den inte helt genomförda religionsfriheten. Dock fanns det också andra röster som framhöll att man hade tillräckligt med frihet och möjligheter att utöva sin religion.

Kvinnorna pekade i intervjuerna också på saker som de uppfattade som begränsande för dem som kvinnor, muslimer, albaner eller makedoniska medborgare. Också andra faktorer än en känsla av marginalisering kunde leda till att den religiösa identiteten blev mera betonad, till exempel instabila ekonomiska omständigheter, korruption, och otillräcklig implementering av rättigheter och friheter. De samhällliga omständigheterna påverkade albanska kvinnornas religiositet och religiösa praxis på två sätt och på två olika nivåer. För *det första* verkar det makedoniska samhället försöka förhandla med muslimer, och muslimkvinnor, så att de på ett ledigare sätt skulle kunna uttrycka sin religiositet offentligt. Trots detta har muslimer ofta känslan av att de

har en marginaliserad position i det övervägande kristna samhället. För *det andra* verkar de samhälleliga omständigheterna väcka två slags reaktioner bland muslimkvinnorna: den ena är att understryka den religiösa identiteten och den andra är att ta distans från den på grund av praktiska eller andra skäl.

På den andra analytiska nivån kunde jag observera kvinnornas identiteter i interaktiva sammanhang. Det islamska samfundet i Republiken Makedonien kännetecknas av en mångfald: muslimer talar olika modersmål, hör till olika islamska grupper och läser olika religiösa skrifter. Kontakterna mellan grupperna är inte alltid oproblematiske och minoriteterna och den position de har i samhället verkar ofta få mindre uppmärksamhet. Enligt albanska kvinnornas erfarenheter, kan islam i Republiken Makedonien uppvisa en mångfald av möjligheter till religionsutövande. Det här aktualiseras genom olika islamiska organisationer och miljöer, samt religiösa övergångsriter och högtider. Det här är relevant också för samspelet mellan å ena sidan islam och å andra sidan köns- och generationstillhörighet. Övergångsriter och islamska högtider var viktiga för albanska kvinnorna och i berättelserna om dessa gavs män och kvinnor ibland olika roller. Kön som en analytisk kategori gjorde också en viss skillnad på nivån av religiös praxis och på en mera allmän nivå. Hur kvinnorna betonade detta var dock inte så accentuerat i alla kontexter. På grund av att islam genom övergångsriterna och högtiderna hade betydelse kunde man anta att islam var en betydelsebärande del av den lokala kulturen och levnadssättet för albanska kvinnorna. Ytterligare betonade kvinnorna att generationstillhörighet och miljöer, till exempel om man bodde i stad eller på landsbyggen, hade ett omvandlande inflytande på muslimernas identiteter och på deras sätt att leva i islam, fastän vissa aspekter av religionsutövandet antogs vara mera stabila och bestå över tid och rum. Kvinnornas åsikter var dock inte enhetliga. Det islamska sättet att leva var viktigt för albanska kvinnorna i denna studie och detta kunde förutom övergångsriter och högtider ta sig uttryck i deras sätt att bete sig gentemot andra, till exempel i familj- och andra mänskliga relationerna, och när de valde jobb, läkare, make eller kandidat de röstade på i politiska sammanhang.

På den tredje individuella analysnivån framkom några mera dogmatiska och teologiska dimensioner som berörde albanska kvinnornas religiositet och motiv bakom deras val i religiösa frågor. Islam var ofta bland de tre viktigaste sakerna i kvinnornas liv, fast människoförhållandena toppade i betydelse bland deras svar. Den islamiska beteendekoden och hur kvinnorna förverkligade den i det dagliga livet

varierade, men den var ändå ofta ett meningsfullt sätt att uttrycka religiös identitet. När albanska kvinnorna reflekterade över vad som var det oundgängaste elementet i deras tro, betonades ofta den sociala dimensionen. Kvinnorna underströk dessutom att växelverkan mellan till exempel tro, tacksamhet, kärlek och renhet var viktig för deras religiositet. Den positiva bilden av människan, löftet om livet efter detta och religiösa rollmodeller kunde fungera som motiverande och inspirerande källor som islam erbjöd för dessa kvinnor i deras religiösa liv. Många kvinnor anförde också att islams betydelse i deras liv hade ökat med åren. Albanska kvinnornas religiösa identiteter, hur de uttryckte dem och hurdana känslor de associerade med sin självförståelse som muslimer, var också i viss mån förknippade med de bilder och attityder som den omgivande miljön tillskrev dem som muslimer, kvinnor och muslimkvinnor.

I Republiken Makedonien kan man se islam som en av de viktiga faktorerna som bidrar till albanska kvinnornas identitetsformation. Islam kan stöda utvecklingen av starkare identiteter av mera lokal karaktär som är anpassade till de rådande samhälleliga omständigheterna eller skapa mindre grupper, som kan vara påverkade av mera globala islamiska rörelser, och som man kan identifiera sig med. Samtidigt gör albanska kvinnorna själva också mera individuella tolkningar av den islamska tron. Ytterligare förenar albanska kvinnornas religiösa identiteter dem med det globala muslimsamfundet. (Jfr Hall 1999) Mellan dessa dimensioner tar albanska kvinnornas identiteter olika framtoningar och uttryck, alla unika, men ofta också i viss mån delade med andra.

I Republiken Makedonien står albanska kvinnorna inför utmaningen av deras multidimensionella tillhörighet, när de definierar och omförhandlar sina identiteter i förhållande till frågor om medborgarskap, nationalitet och kulturtradition samt till de olika etniska och religiösa grupper som samhället består av. Islam och de religiösa identiteterna var meningsfulla för albanska kvinnornas identitetskonstruktion på alla tre nivåer. Olika identitetsaspekter fick dock olika betoningar på olika nivåer i kvinnornas svar. Min analys visade att på den samhälleliga nivån albansk, kulturell, etnisk eller national identitet var mera betydelsefull än på de andra två analytiska nivåerna. Könsidentitet å sin sida var särskilt viktig på den interaktionella nivån, medan den religiösa identiteten verkade vara den mest betonade på den individuella nivån. Man bör naturligtvis komma ihåg att de här uppfattningarna är flytande och har tänjbara gränser, och att de därför inte kan



betraktas som exklusiva och fullständigt ovillkorliga. Ändå kunde jag särskilja de här betoningarna i materialet.

## Appendices

### I Names of the Macedonian cities

Macedonian	Serbian	Turkish	Greek	Albanian
Bitola	Bitolj	Manastir/Manastr	Monastiri	Manastiri
Kumanovo	Kumanovo	Kumanovo	Kumanovo	Kumanova
Ohrid	Ohrid	Ohri	Ohrida	Ohër
Prilep	Prilep	Perlepe	Perlepes	Prilepi
Skopje	Skoplje	Üsküb	Skopia	Shkupi
Štip	Štip	Istib	Istib	Shtipi
Strumica	Strumica	Üstrümce	Stroumniza	Strumica
Tetovo	Tetovo	Kalkandelen	Tetovo	Tetova
Veles	Veles	Köprülü	Veles	Vlesi

(Adapted from the appendix of *La République de Macédoine. Nouvelle venue dans le concert européen* (1998, 164) in which the table was realized by the editors Christophe Chiclet and Bernard Lory).

### II Islamic terminology

(Adapted mainly from the vocabularies in Bougarel and Clayer (2001b), Elsie (2001) and Popovic and Veinstein (1996)).

<b>Alhamdoulillah</b>	Thanks be to God.
<b>Ashura</b>	Islamic celebration on the tenth day of Islamic Muharram month, which ends the Matem fasting and is celebrated particularly for the memory of Imam Hussein's martyrdom.
<b>Bakllava</b>	Oriental sweet.
<b>Baba</b>	Turkish word baba means a father and refers to a spiritual leader or master, particularly in the Bektashi tarikat.
<b>Baraka</b>	Blessing power the graves of the evliyas are considered to contain.

<b>Bismillah</b>	In the name of God.
<b>Çefejn</b>	Known in Albanian also as <i>çefin</i> , the white cloth in which the body is wrapped when buried.
<b>Dars</b>	Islamic religious lecture or lesson.
<b>Dede</b>	Dede is a Turkish word for grandfather, also the Albanian word <i>gjysh</i> (grandfather) is used. It refers to the head of the whole Bektashi tari- kat and to the head of the babas.
<b>Dervish</b>	Member of a Sufi brotherhood.
<b>Dua'</b>	Personal supplication and invocation to God.
<b>Edebi</b>	Islamic ethics.
<b>Estagfirullah</b>	I seek forgiveness from God.
<b>Evliya</b>	Companions or allies of God.
<b>Ezan</b>	Prayer call.
<b>Farz</b>	Islamic religious practices which are requested by the Sunna.
<b>Ghusl</b>	Arabic word, in Albanian the word <i>gusëll</i> is used, referring to a full ablution, ritual wash, required for various rituals and prayers.
<b>Hadith</b>	Narrations of deeds, sayings and acts of Prophet Muhammad.
<b>Hafaska</b>	A woman who knows the Qur'an by heart.
<b>Halal</b>	Arabic word for acceptable.
<b>Hallvë</b>	Oriental sweet.
<b>Haram</b>	Arabic word for forbidden.
<b>Hatme</b>	Act of reading the whole Qur'an.
<b>Hajj</b>	Arabic word for pilgrimage to Mecca, Albanian term is <i>haxh</i> .
<b>Hifz</b>	Learning and memorizing the Qur'an by heart.
<b>Hodja</b>	The term is of Turkish origin and means an imam. In Albanian it takes the form <i>hoxhë</i> .
<b>Ibadet</b>	Devotional acts.

<b>Iqra</b>	The first revealed Quranic word, which begins the Sura number 96 and is the imperative of the verb 'read'.
<b>Ilahiya</b>	Known also as nasheed; Islamic hymn.
<b>Iman</b>	Faith in the metaphysical realities of Islam.
<b>Kanun</b>	Albanian customary law.
<b>Lira</b>	Albanian word for gold money that is used to endow.
<b>Mahram</b>	A male relative through bloodline or marriage.
<b>Matem</b>	In Shi'ism a ten-day-long fast that the Bektashis follow in the Islamic month of Muharram.
<b>Medrese</b>	Islamic high school.
<b>Mekteb</b>	Islamic elementary school.
<b>Mevlut</b>	Derived from a Turkish word mevlid, a Sunni event in which the history of birth and life of Prophet Muhammed is focal.
<b>Millet</b>	Turkish term for division of confessional communities in the Ottoman Empire. Millets enjoyed of certain autonomy in their internal, religious and cultural administration.
<b>Muftinia</b>	Islamic administrative unit in the Republic of Macedonia.
<b>Muhabet</b>	Public reunions in the Bektashi tarikat. A word deriving from Turkish that means love, affection, attachment and friendship.
<b>Muhib</b>	Meaning the one who loves, or a sympathizer, a spiritual member of Bektashi tarikat, who has received an initiation involving a ritual purification and a profession of faith during a ceremony held at a tekke.
<b>Mujahideen</b>	Muslims who believe that they are struggling or even fighting in the path indicated by God.
<b>Namaz</b>	Prayer.
<b>Nefes</b>	Literally meaning 'the sighs'; Bektashi hymns.

<b>Niqab</b>	A veil which may be a part women's Islamic clothing. It covers the face and leaves only the eyes visible.
<b>Niqah</b>	The matrimonial contract between bride and groom. Known in Albanian also as kurorëzim.
<b>Kurban Bajram</b>	In Arabic Eid al-Adha, Eid that is celebrated at the end of pilgrimage to Mecca in the twelfth and last month of Islamic calendar Dhu al-Hijjah.
<b>Petlla</b>	A kind of bread fried in oil. Known also with the orthography petulla.
<b>Reqat</b>	Derived from the Arabic word rak'a, movements and words performed by the Muslims during their prayer.
<b>Ramazan</b>	The month of Ramadan in the Islamic calendar during which Muslims fast. This orthography used in Albanian and in several other Balkan languages.
<b>Ramazan Bajram</b>	Known also in Albanian as Sheqer Bajram or even Bajram i Ramazanit, in Arabic Eid al-Fitr, festivity that ends the month of Ramadan.
<b>Rijaset</b>	Leadership, the highest administration in the Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia.
<b>Reis-ul-ulema</b>	Head of the Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia
<b>Sexhde</b>	Prostration, one position in the prayer.
<b>Shamija</b>	Small white scarf that Albanian women wear in the house.
<b>Sharia</b>	Islamic law.
<b>Shaykh</b>	Religious leader or master in a Sufi brotherhood
<b>Shehadet</b>	Derived from the Arabic word shahadat, the confession of faith. Declaration of faith in the oneness of God and acceptance of Prophet Muhammad as God's Prophet.

<b>Sufi</b>	Sufism is a branch of Islamic knowledge that focuses on spiritual development of the believer and is considered to be the inner mystical dimension of Islam. It is also known with the Arabic term <i>tasawwuf</i> . Sufis are the ones who have chosen the path of Sufism, often within a Sufi brotherhood.
<b>Sultan Nevruz</b>	Birthday of Imam 'Ali celebrated on the 22nd of March particularly by the Bektashis in the Republic of Macedonia.
<b>Sunna</b>	The example given by the Prophet Muhammad during his life. Known in Albanian as <i>sunnet</i> . Islamic usage of deeds, sayings and acts of Prophet Muhammad, which are preserved in hadiths.
<b>Tarikat</b>	Turkish term deriving from the Arabic word <i>tariqah</i> , which means a way, path or method. <i>Tarikat</i> , which can also be understood to mean an order or a brotherhood, is usually considered to make a part of the inner mystical dimension of Islam, <i>tasawwuf</i> , known also as Sufism.
<b>Tawhid</b>	Oneness of God.
<b>Tekke</b>	Turkish word for an establishment that shelters the activities of a <i>tarik</i> . Known in Albanian also as <i>teqe</i> .
<b>Tespih</b>	Islamic prayer beads.
<b>Turban</b>	Woman's head dress in an Islamic marriage ceremony.
<b>Türbe</b>	In Albanian also <i>tyrbe</i> . A Turkish word for tomb, usually meaning that of a spiritually remarkable person. These sites are believed to contain a special spiritual power, <i>baraka</i> .
<b>Ulema</b>	Turkish spelling meaning Islamic scholars, deriving from the Arabic word <i>ulama</i> .
<b>Umma</b>	Global Islamic community, known in Albanian as <i>ummet</i> .
<b>Vakuf</b>	Islamic religious endowment, deriving from the Arabic word <i>waqf</i> .

<b>Wudu</b>	Small ritual wash, often related to the preparation for prayers.
<b>Ziyara</b>	Visiting the graves of evliyas.
<b>Zikr</b>	Is a Turkish form of Arabic dhikr, devotional act performed particularly in the tarikats. Zikr can consist of repeating prayers or God's names. The way zikr is practised varies within different tarikats or according to the level of the initiation the member of the tarikat has. It can be accompanied by special respiratory techniques or moves. Sometimes participants sit in a circle around the shaykh, who leads the ritual.
<b>Xhenaze</b>	The rituals related to Islamic funeral are in Albanian called xhenaze, word meaning a corpse. Also the Albanian word kufomë can be used.
<b>Xhuma</b>	The Friday prayer deriving from the Arabic word jum'a.

### III Questionnaire

#### Questions

Name

Citizenship

Mother tongue

Which one of the following age groups do you belong to

18–23

24–27

28–30

30–35

36–40

41–44

45–50

51–55  
56–60  
61–  
Undefined

You were born

in a village  
in a city  
outside the borders of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia  
else where, where

Would you describe shortly your childhood family?

Where are you currently living?

in a village  
in a city  
outside the borders of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia  
elsewhere, where

How would you describe the economic situation of your family?

Good  
Satisfactory  
below satisfactory  
Precarious  
Undefined

What is your level of education?

I haven't finished the elementary school  
Elementary school  
High school  
Vocational school  
I am currently studying in the university  
I have a university degree  
If other, what

What is your occupation?

How would you describe the level of religiosity in your family?



very religious  
 religious  
 not very interested in religious issues  
 not at all interested in religious issues  
 Other, what  
 Undefined

Which of the following concepts describe you the best? I am a

Muslim  
 Believer  
 Mystic  
 Muslim belonging to the Hanafi School  
 Muslim belonging to another community than the Hanafi  
 School, if so which one  
 Religious person  
 Spiritual person  
 Religiously conservative  
 Religiously liberal  
 Searcher  
 Fundamentalist  
 Other, what  
 Undefined

## 1) Religion and you

How would you describe your current life situation?

What are the three most important things in your life at the moment?

What do you value the most, the fact that you are a Muslim; that you are a woman or something else?

What does religion mean to you personally, is it an important focus of interest?

Does religion or faith affect your personal choices and, if it does, in what ways?

Would you give three important words, which describe your religion or faith or are closely linked to it?

Do you feel that your femininity affects on exerting of your religious practice?

What in your faith/religion do you consider the most inalienable/indispensable?

### 1.1) Religion in everyday life

How would you describe the space you give to religion in your everyday life?

Has this space always been somewhat the same or has it changed during the years?

Has some particular factor influenced this development?

How would you estimate the extent to which you pay attention to religious duties in your life?

When you reflect upon religion as an element of your life what of the following terms would you prefer to use:

spiritual elements/values  
 religious elements/values  
 existential elements/values  
 convictional or moral elements/values  
 life values  
 religious conviction  
 moral conviction  
 spiritual conviction

### 1.2) Religious celebrations and transitions in human life

What Islamic or possibly other religious holidays do you celebrate?

How do you celebrate them?

How is religion linked to different kinds of transitions in human life?

Does the birth of a child have religious dimensions,  
 and if it does would you tell more about them?

Who solemnizes a marriage in the society you live in?

Would you describe the elements of a religious marriage ceremony?

Who is responsible for the funeral services in the society?

Would you describe how a religious funeral takes place?

### **1.3) Religious space**

Is some particular place or environment connected to your religious practice? How?

How often do you visit such places?

Are there, in your estimation, enough supply when it comes to concrete places for religious practice? Would you wish things would change?

How does religion become visible in your house and in the way your home functions?

### **1.4) Religious education**

Which religion or religious tradition do you yourself know best?

Have you received some kind of religious education?

Where did this education take place, who was the teacher and how often did you participate in it?

Do you read religious literature? Could you mention some the works as an example?

What holy or otherwise important texts linked to your confession have you read?

Do you have religious role models? Could you name them? Why do you consider them and their life-works precious and meaningful?

### **1.5) Religion in the life with children and in their upbringing**

Does religion or faith have an influence on the choices you make in bringing up your children, and if it does in what way?

Can religion be perceived in the relationships and daily life of your family according to your opinion?

## **2) Religion and community**

How would you define the community you belong to?

How is your life as an Albanian woman in your own community?

What possibilities does the fact that you are a Muslim offer to you within your community?

How do you see the relationship between your cultural background and your religious conviction? Do they both support each other in a natural way?

How would you describe the interest in religion in general in your community, is it increasing or decreasing? How do the tendencies manifest themselves?

Is the mosque community important for you?

Are you active in your community and if so in what way?

Do you possibly belong to some religious grouping or organization other than your mosque community? If you do, what is the group in question and how do you participate in its activities?

Would you consider religion or religiosity to be a private matter or a collective factor? Would you elaborate your answer please?

### **2.1) Generations and genders**

Is religion in your own community practiced differently by representatives of older and younger generations?

Is praxis developing in a positive or negative direction?

Do you wish that things would change?

Are there differences between the genders when it comes to practicing of religion?

What kinds of active roles can the Muslim woman take up? What are your own thoughts concerning this matter?

What does adab (Islamic etiquette) mean to you?

Does mahram (male companion through bloodline or marriage) mean something to you? How is this impact visible in your everyday life?

### **3) Religion and society**

What is it like to be an Albanian woman in the society you live in?

How would you describe the status of religion in the society you live in?

How would you describe the interest in religion in general in the society you live in, is it increasing or decreasing?

How does it show?

Does religion influence your positioning in the society?

What possibilities does the fact that you are a Muslim offer you in contemporary society?

Does religion have an impact on your choices regarding the societal and social questions and if so, in what way?

#### **3.1 Different groupings and issues concerning their rights**

Do you think that one can find various communities in contemporary society?

In case there is a variety of Islamic movements could you name them or some of them?

How do you perceive the relationships between different Islamic movements and organizations?

Do Muslims who are representatives of different social groups encounter each other and if they do, how would you describe the relationship between the groups?

Who looks after women's interests when it comes to social questions?

Do you find it particularly necessary to attend to such questions?

Are there religiously oriented women organizations in the society?

Within the current social circumstances are there social groups that consider their rights to be limited (for example representatives of different religious groups, various linguistic groups, minorities, women, youth etc.)?

If these kinds of groups exist, which rights in general are the people uneasy about?

If this kind of suppression takes place, does it have an influence on you personally?

How do you see or understand the freedom of faith or religion in your society?

Are you satisfied with this situation or should something be changed?

### **3.2 Religious education**

How is religious education organized today in the society you live in?

Is the same religious education given to everyone regardless of the religious background of the individual?

### **3.3 Religious publications**

Is religious or spiritual literature published in the country you live in?

What is the language of the publications?

Are there other spiritual publications, such as newspapers or magazines, published in the country where you live?

In what language are they printed? Could you name some of them?

### **3.4. Religion and politics**

Have you reflected upon religion's political role in the society? Would you describe the situation more in detail please?

Do you consider that the power structures and religion are separated from each other in the society you live in?

Are you satisfied with the situation?

Would you please say something about how your opinion is motivated?

Do you think that belonging to certain political or religious groupings are somehow connected to each other, and if so, how is this visible in the society you live in?

Do you think that the language of religion is used in the society to achieve the political goals?

What political questions are currently topical in the society concerning religion or convictional/ confessional matters?

### **3.5 Religion and media**

Does the media have an impact on how religion is perceived on the social level? And if so, how would you describe the effect?

How are the religious issues conveyed by the media on the local level?

Have the religious leaders participated in some social debates in the country you live in?

If these kinds of debates take place, how do they proceed and

how is information about them distributed?

Do you consider that the religious persons or religious leaders in general tolerate criticism in the society you live in?

#### **4) Religion and the global context**

What do you think about the religious traditions or trends that Muslims worldwide observe today?

Does the religious community to which you belong have international contacts? If it does, what are these contacts like? With whom or what are they established (country, institution, community or similar)?

What does Umma (Islamic community) mean to you?

##### **4.1 Religion, freedom of speech and human rights**

What do you think about freedom of speech, is it a necessary right, should there be limits how it is practiced?

Can religions be analyzed and criticized in the same way as other opinions, values or convictions, what do you think about this?

Are there strivings to benefit in the religious or political field within the society which disregard human rights, what do you think? Would you tell more about the situation, please?

#### **5) Some theological and dogmatic reflections**

How does your religion perceive the human being?

Do the images of different genders differ from one another in a religious sense? If they do how can the difference be perceived?

Do you feel that your religious conviction places expectations on you? Does religion presuppose expectations concerning certain kinds of action or behaviour? And if it does would you tell more about it?



Do you feel that you can live and express your religion or faith freely without any inter-mediator? Would you absolutely or preferably want to have such a figure?

How much does the perspective of life after death mean to you?

What does piety mean to you in religious life?

What would you consider to be the most essential element in your religion or faith, and why?

## IV Historical and Demographic Maps of the Republic of Macedonia

### Map 1.

*The Political Affiliation of the Territory of the Republic of Macedonia since the Early 20th Century.*



*The Balkans before the First World War.*



*The Balkans after the First World War.*



*The Balkans in 1999.*

**Map 2.**

*Partition of Geographical Macedonia in 1913.*



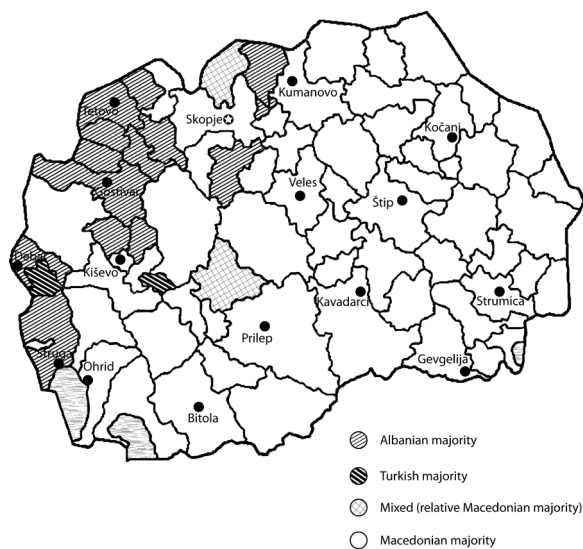
**Map 3.**

*Map of the present Republic of Macedonia.*

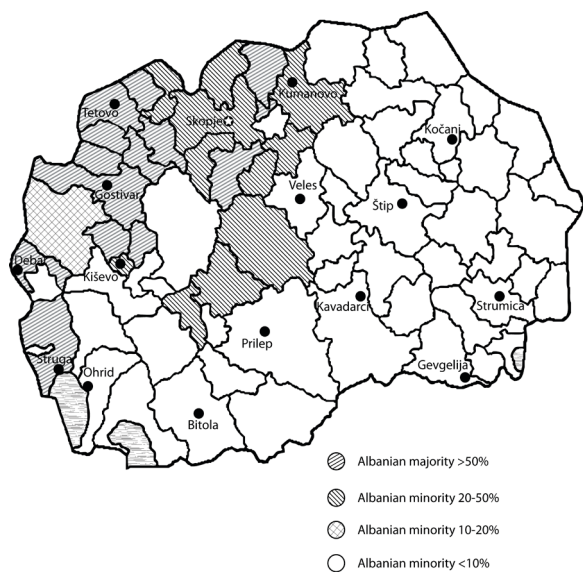


**Map 4.**

*Concentrations of the Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Macedonia According to the 2002 Census.*

**Map 5.**

*Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia According to the 2002 Census.*

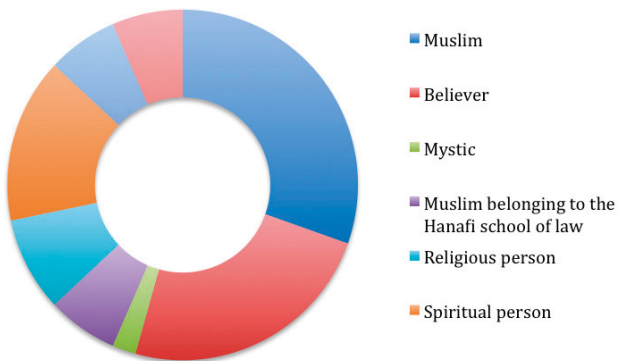


## WV Tables of Women’s Religiosity

**Table 2.**

*Concepts that According to the Women Described Them Best in a Religious Sense.*

Muslim	14
Believer	11
Mystic	1
Muslim belonging to the Hanafi school of law	3
Religious person	4
Spiritual person	7
Religiously liberal	3
Searcher	3
Muslim belonging to another community than the Hanafi school of law (if so which one)	0
Religiously conservative	0
Fundamentalist	0
Other, what	0
Undefined	0



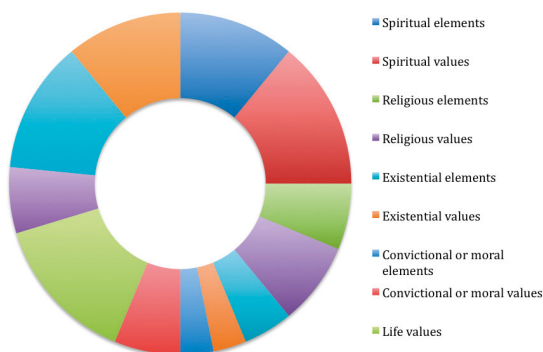
**Table 3.**

*What Religion as an Element in Life Meant to the Women.*

Name	Spiritual elements	Spiritual values	Religious elements	Religious values	Existential elements	Existential values	Convictional or moral elements	Convictional or moral values	Life values	Religious conviction	Moral conviction	Spiritual conviction
Fatima	x	x			x	x	x	x			x	
Amina	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			
Miriam	x	x	x	x					x			
Mahabba				x								x
Nuriya			x		x						x	x
Aisha		x		x								
Hawwa									x	x	x	x
Sabah												x
Khadija	x	x										x*
Farah	x	x							x	x	x	
Amala		x										
Wafa		x						x**				
Zahra	x							x**				
Nawal									x			x
Qadr			x	x					x	x	x	
Habiba	x	x							x			
Aida									x		x	x
Hanifa									x	x	x	x
Zainab												
total	7	9	4	5	3	2	2	4	9	4	8	7

\* first spiritual then everything else

\*\* moral values



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4. Mahabba, woman, 24 years old, village dweller / IF mgt 2008/086 and IF 2008:014:3v
5. Nuriya, woman, 22 years old, village dweller / IF mgt 2008/087 and IF 2008/014:4
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Nora Repo

# An Islamic Mosaic – Women’s Identities in Transition

Albanian Muslim Women in the Former  
Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The mountainous and multicultural Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a small Balkan state, which is one of the successor states of socialist Yugoslavia. In this country Islam is the second largest religious tradition and the majority of Muslims are Albanians.

This study presents characteristics of, and nuances in, the mosaic of Albanian women’s everyday religiosities and studies the mosaic-like array of meanings of Islam as an element in the construction of Muslim women’s identity in the contemporary context.

