



The Albanian Mawlid  
of Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku (r.a.)

STUDY GUIDE

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*Thank you for your support for the Cambridge New Mosque Project. This recording is a gift to our Project by a group of students of traditional sacred knowledge in the noble Muslim land of Albania. We are proud to present this recording, which gives a unique insight into a purely traditional scene of Balkan mosque life, with English subtitles taken in part from the translation by E.J.W. Gibb of the Mawlid of Süleiman Çelebi, may Allah's mercy rest upon him. The singers include many from the very old generation who learned and loved the Mawlid publicly before the official prohibition of religion in Albania by the atheist regime of Enver Hoxha in 1967, and secretly after that time. Between 1967 and 1992, scholars were mocked, tortured and imprisoned for their lack of belief in atheism. The country's mosques were closed and most were destroyed. Under a law of 1976, failure to accept atheism carried an automatic ten-year prison sentence. Many ulema were killed; among the martyrs we remember Albania's grand mufti, Hafiz Ibrahim Dibra, and mufti of Durrës Mustafa Efendi Varoshi, and hundreds of others.*

(Abdal Hakim Murad)

## The life and work of Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku

Rezart Beka

Hafiz Ulqinaku was an Albanian born in Ulqin, Montenegro, in 1853. He finished his elementary school and part of his madrasa education in Ulqin, and the rest of his studies in Shkodra (Albania) in the Bushatllinjve Madrasa, where he received his *ijazah*. In the year 1882 he was appointed teacher in the elementary school of the Duda neighborhood in Shkodra. In the year 1884 he was appointed as teacher and imam in the city of Lezha. Thanks to his excellent knowledge and moral qualities he was nominated by the people of the town to become their mufti. Their proposal was approved by the high authorities in Istanbul in the year 1889.<sup>1</sup> He died in Lezha in the year 1913, but was buried in Shkodra, where almost the entire city attended his funeral.

Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku was a very complex figure. His contribution was not limited only to the religious field but extended also to the literary, linguistic, political and educational arena.

He is particularly celebrated for his translation, in the year 1873, of the famous *mawlid* written by the great poet and traveller Suleiman Çelebi (1409). He translated this *mawlid* into Albanian using the Arab-

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<sup>1</sup> Zyra e fetfave, Sektori i Meshihatit Islam në Turqi, Sekretaria, më 14.1.1900.

Ottoman alphabet. The first edition of this Albanian *mawlid* was published in Istanbul in the year 1879.<sup>2</sup> However it was his son Hafiz Seit Ulqinaku who in the year 1936 published the *mawlid* in the Albanian alphabet under the title *Mevludi Sherif*. The translation of this *mawlid* is in an eloquent and elegant Albanian language while, as was normal for the time, the influence of Ottoman and Persian terminology is clearly evident. Apart from the literal translation, in many parts of the *mawlid* Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku engaged in adaptation or the addition of new verses which are absent from the original text. In many places he has played skillfully and ingenuously with the text by creating some wonderful renderings of the original in the Albanian language. In Albania this *mawlid* is recited with a specific *maqam* or modal melody which has as its basis the traditional melody of the folk-songs of the northern part of Albania, especially Shkodra and Ulqin.

The translation of this *mawlid* in Albanian language carried considerable historical and political significance. The author wrote it during the time when nationalistic tendencies were making their first appearance in the region. The period was characterized by a great fervour in establishing new national identities expressed in various wars of independence from the Ottoman Empire. This period is notorious also for the many internal and religious wars, ethnical and religious 'cleansings'. The faith and the very existence of the Muslims of the Balkans were very much in dispute. By writing in Albanian, Ulqinaku, who was himself directly involved in the nationalistic movement of that time, wanted to preserve the Albanian language in written form, to

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<sup>2</sup> Hafiz Salih Gasheviq, *Mevludi Serif, Hafiz Ali Riza Ulqinaku, Dodatak Mevludi-Šerifu* (Titograd: Starješinstvo Islamske Zajednice u Crnoj Gori, 1972), p. 19.

spread the religious message to the masses, and to stop the Slavic influence in Albanian territory and to strengthen the Muslim identity of his compatriots. Many scholars who have studied his life and works have acknowledged his contribution and the importance of his translation of the *mawlid* in preserving the Muslim identity of Albanians and the Albanian language from Slavic influence. This is one reason why his *mawlid* has been very renowned and recited in the Albanian diaspora also, especially in America and Australia. Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku himself expresses explicitly in his *mawlid* his aim of preserving the Albanian language when he writes:

*N'gjuhën shqipe kam qëllim un me i tregue  
Që kështu vllaznit sa do pak me përfitue,  
sepse .... Asht nji gjuh' qi me kalem s'asht kollanis.*

I intend to narrate this mawlid in Albanian  
in order for the people to benefit  
Because ... Albanian is a language which has not been written.

Given the patriotic and religious intent of the author, the *mawlid* became very influential in Albania and was recited not only in the northern part of it, from where the author comes, but also in almost all Albania and a great part of Kosovo. The recitation, the fame and the distribution of this *mawlid* over almost all the territory of Albania contributed greatly in the forging of Albanian identity, and the preservation of Albanian language and of Albanian Islam. The distinguished Albanian scholar Tahir Bushati writes: 'The *mawlid* of Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku became a work very much loved among the Muslim

believers of that time, and was welcomed with great enthusiasm. Most of the Muslim families put it as an imperative to themselves to have a copy of it in their homes. Even in the religious schools [*maktap*] the text of the *mawlid* was assigned as supplementary reading for boys and girls.<sup>3</sup> Idriz Lamaj, an Albanian scholar of the diaspora, says regarding the *mawlid*: ‘Until the present day Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku’s version of the *mawlid* has been the most perfect, the most popular and the most widespread in the Albanian language.’<sup>4</sup>

This is why in 27 December 1994 he was given the highest honorific title by the Albanian state: ‘Mësues i Popullit’ (Teacher of the Nation) by President Sali Berisha, with the designation: ‘Cleric, distinguished intellectual, honorable teacher and educator of the youth and of the people. Writer of many religious and scientific works.’<sup>5</sup>

His translation activity was not confined to the *mawlid* alone. Hafiz Ulqinaku also translated the versified book *Huda Rabbim* of the Turkish *alim* and philosopher Erzurumlu Ibrahim Hakkı. He translated and rendered in verse a small manual on religion (*ilmihal*). Together with the *mawlid* these works were published in Istanbul in one volume in the year 1887.

In the field of linguistics Hafiz Ulqinaku composed three dictionaries, the first a Turkish-Albanian dictionary (composed in verse), the second a Turkish-Albanian dictionary (arranged alphabetically) and the third, also in alphabetic order, an Albanian-Turkish dictionary. All the three dictionaries together comprise some

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<sup>3</sup> Hamdi Bushati, “Materiale per Shkodran”, manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> Idriz Lamaj, *Mevludi, botimi i pare*, 1982, in Biblioteka Myslimane Shqiptare, nr.3, (New York, Parathënia shkruar prej Imam Vehbi Ismailit, 1982), pp. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Dekreti Nr. 999, datë 27.12.1994 i Presidentit të Republikës Sali Berisha.

1334 pages, and are of great value to students of Albanian linguistic history. The most valuable of the three is the Albanian-Turkish dictionary which contains 9021 words.<sup>6</sup>

In the field of education, Hafiz Ulqinaku wrote an Albanian primer in the Arabic character. This work was intended to make possible the learning and the writing of the Albanian language. Unfortunately because of the many difficulties posed by the Ottoman administration, which was opposing the national tendencies of the Albanian population, the dictionaries and the primer were never published and remained in manuscript form.<sup>7</sup>

Hafiz Ulqinaku was also a *mujahid*. Together with his shaykh and mentor Myderriz Sali Hylja he fought the invading Montenegrin forces which were attempting the annexation of Albanian territories. He fought until the northernmost Albanian territories together with his hometown Ulqin fell under the occupation of the Montenegrins in 1880. After this his family together with another 400 families left Ulqin for Shkodra.

Hafiz Ulqinaku was renowned also for his piety, his qualities as imam and mufti and for his scrupulousness in performing the religious rituals. He demonstrated great qualities in administering the religious madrasas and for establishment of the mosque of Lezha in 1909. For his religious authority, his erudition in resolving the theological problems

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<sup>6</sup> Osman Myderrizi, 'Letërsia shqipe me alfabetin arab,' në *Buletin për shkencat shoqerore*, 2 (1955), pp. 148-155.

<sup>7</sup> Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku, *Elitbaja (Abetarja)*, fotokopje në AQSH.

and his deep competence in religious issues he was commended by a letter from the Dar al-Ifta of Istanbul in 1900.<sup>8</sup>

The personality of Hafiz Ulqinaku has been evaluated by many scholars and specialists who have studied his life and work. For example Sytki Malo Hoxha (himself an academic from Ulqin) states that ‘Hafiz Ulqinaku was a distinguished personality of our culture in general. He was a pure patriot, a talented poet, an excellent translator, a distinguished lexicographer and a respected *alim* in the area where he lived and worked.’<sup>9</sup>

The famous Albanian orientalist Osman Myderrizi, at the end of a series of very precise studies on Ulqinaku, states:

The replacement of Turkish in the *Mawlid* and the Arabic in the *khutba* with the Albanian language was very important, because this brought as a consequence a consecration of the Albanian script [...] His dictionary is of great value because it contains many rare words, including maritime terms. Some of this lexis became without doubt part of the general lexicon of the Albanian language and assisted the development of the national literary language.<sup>10</sup>

Another distinguished Albanian orientalist, Fahr Dizdari, in his work *A Dictionary of Orientalism in the Albanian Language* expresses his appreciation of Ulqinaku’s *mawlid* by saying:

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<sup>8</sup> Virtyt Avdyli, *Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku, rilindësi që i kushtoi jetën gjuhës dhe diturisë*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Sytki Malo hoxha, ‘Rreth Mevludit te Hafiz Ali Riza Ulqinakut’, *Hëna e Re* (Shkup), VII, 59-60, 1993, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Osman Myderrizi, ‘Letërsia shqipe me alfabetin arab’, *Buletin për shkencat shoqerore*, 2 (1955), pp.148-155



Even though this is an early translation, this *mawlid* has stood the test of time, because the author was very capable of speaking to the feelings of the believers with a poetic spirit that distinguished him from the others, by moving the audience through eloquent and touching expressions. This *mawlid* is still in use and often requested by people.<sup>11</sup>

Such were some of the most salient contributions of Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku to the Muslim community and to Albanian culture in general. Despite his importance many of his works remain unstudied and stand in need of a critical edition that would contextualize his work and make it available afresh for contemporary Albanian society.

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<sup>11</sup> Tahir Dizdari, 'Fjalori i termave islame në gjuhën shqipe', zgjedhur, redaktuar e përgatitur nga Ali Musa Basha, published in *Drita islame*.