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BEHIND THE VEIL. The reform of Islam in Inter-war Albania or the search for a “modern” and “European” Islam

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Abstract : The progressive ban on the veil which occurred in Albania in the interwar years reveals different phenomena. In order to build and to gain recognition for their state in the “middle of Europe,” and despite – or because of – the Muslim majority in the country, Albanian political authorities and secularist intellectuals wanted to build a “modern” and “European” Islam. Their action was also dictated by a wish for secularization in order to set up a multi-denominational nation, but also by the devalorization of Islam among the elites. Some leaders of the Islamic Community were also convinced of the need to build a “European Islam”, but not exactly in the same way, and not at the expense of a loss of power. The most significant result of their action was the appearance of a new religious elite promoting an Islam of the Qur'an and of progress, such as that presented by the Lahori Ahmadiyya working at that time in the middle of Europe for the promotion of Islam. However, the process of banning the veil shows the complexity of building a European Islam “à l'albanaise”, i.e. a specific approach to secularization, a submission of the upper levels of the Islamic official hierarchy to the political authorities, a difficulty for this hierarchy to impose itself on all Muslims in the country and a limited impact of the reforms within Albanian society.

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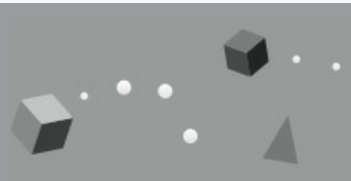
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Islam in Albania mainly arrived during the Ottoman period when the majority of Albanians over time converted to Islam and in particular two of its denominations: Sunni and Bektashi (a Shia-Sufi order). Following the Albanian National Awakening (Rilindja) tenets and the deemphasizing of religion during the 20th century, the democratic, monarchic later the communist governments followed a systematic dereligionization of the Albanian nation and national culture. Due to this policy as with all other