

## The Legendary Commander: the construction of an Albanian master-narrative in post-war Kosovo\*

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**ABSTRACT.** The ongoing, post-war construction of Albanian martyrs, memory and the nation in Kosovo has produced iconic tropes of militant resistance, unity and national independence. This critical interpretive account, based on years of the authors' ethnographic and political engagement with Albanians in post-war Kosovo, focuses on the making of a master narrative that is centred on the 'sublime sacrifice' of the insurgent KLA leader Adem Jashari, known as the 'Legendary Commander'. It also aims to trace voices of discord with this master narrative, testing contestations in terms of the rural–urban, political and gender divides in Kosovo-Albanian society. It concludes that the narrow international view of Albanians as either 'victims' or 'perpetrators' has contributed to the consolidation of this powerful narrative, its celebration of Albanian agency in militant resistance and the closing of public debate within Albanian society.

This article focuses on the construction of a Pan-Albanian master narrative in post-war Kosovo<sup>1</sup>, a storyline for an independent country that also anchors a collective national identity. Kosovo is not an independent state and is no longer fully part of Serbia and Montenegro, but is held in a United Nations-led trusteeship. Its political status is a contested issue, whose negotiation is influenced by competing historical understandings and national identifications. Here we provide a critical account of the rise of a homogenising narrative in Albanian society, a subject that has not been given scholarly consideration until now. We concentrate on one symbolic event – the massacre<sup>2</sup> of the insurgent Jashari family, killed in the hamlet of Prekaz in March 1998 while fighting Serb troops. This was neither the only massacre nor the worst during the recent conflict, but is a place where many stories

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converge. It is not a single event because the story of the people involved, born and raised in the rural, rebellious region of Drenica, does not start there. Their deaths and the destruction of their house is not the end of the story either: in its immediate aftermath, the war spread and intensified; a campaign also began – in the media, literature, arts, historiography and public ceremonies – to produce meanings and memories of the massacre as a symbol of Albanian national liberation. Today, this symbolism has a strong hold on the Albanian imagination in communities in Kosovo, the wider Balkan region,<sup>3</sup> and among the Diaspora. Adem Jashari, identified as the militant leader of the family and of the Albanian armed resistance, has become known as *komandant legjendar* (the legendary commander), a mythical figure who binds past and future generations to the nation. The place where he died with his family is the popular destination for an Albanian political tourism that has acquired the character of a pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup>

master narrative of an Albanian Kosovo centred on Prekaz and Adem Jashari captivates Albanian national identity as a mythical tradition of armed resistance against foreign oppressors, most notably the Serbs after the 1912 annexation of the Ottoman province of Kosovo. This master narrative is constructed by ‘memory entrepreneurs’ (Jelin 2003: 34), who imagine and concretely locate the nation in the local, traditionalist rural society. Through this process, built on a powerful interaction of private and public mourning, they provide important elements of identity politics and give meaning to the collective trauma of the more recent war experience. The master narrative thus constructed resonates across very different groups, because it recalls a shared self-understanding as an oppressed nation looking for political and psychological deliverance. It also stirs up criticism, most notably sub-narratives and contestations that do not embrace the mythical aspects of war and resistance. But it leaves no space for public disagreement, and the apparent homogenisation of Albanian national identity that follows constitutes an obstacle to pluralism and civic nationhood. We argue that in order to understand how this Kosovo master narrative is constructed, why it is so powerful and what its limits are, the many stories and voices around the Prekaz massacre must be heard and explored.

Our research contributes to the study of nationalism from an ‘eventful perspective’ (Brubaker 1996: 21). We focus on the dynamics that the event of the Prekaz massacre generated within Albanian society in Kosovo and beyond, a differentiated ‘field’ where political positions and stances vie for hegemony (*ibid.*: 60). Our approach is interdisciplinary, based on extensive use of local literature, media, oral history archives and Internet chat rooms. We also searched for individual voices and stories that have not yet found a public forum or become interesting to local media, historiography and social research; and we found them in hundreds of personal interviews, informal conversations and participant observation conducted over six years of research.<sup>5</sup> The time committed to fieldwork and the continuous interaction with the local society allowed us to overcome the initial reticence, and sometimes suspicion of, the community, and to find reserved acceptance but

also hospitality in private homes. It provided us with a unique opportunity to understand the relation between memory, history and the nation, as it is experienced and negotiated.

As we explored the dynamics of the nationalisation of memory, we also kept in mind that no study of nationalism should detract from the relations between national identity and the state. During the 1990s, an Albanian national identity, making unique proprietary claims to the then Yugoslav province of Kosovo, was homogenised from below but also from above: from below, by the popular resistance that took the form of civil disobedience, and by the establishment of an Albanian society parallel to the Serb state, even as underground cells started to plan a guerrilla war; from above, because of the state's outright repression as well as policies defining ethnic groups and assigning rights. The constitutional right to autonomy from Yugoslavia and the identification with a proclaimed Albanian 'tradition of patience and prudence, facing domination' (Rugova 1994: 130) characterised this national identity. The Pan-Albanian master narrative centred on Jashari is constructed in the context of the international protectorate that has governed Kosovo since 1999, at first alone, and alongside provisional institutions of self-government since 2002. Its power as the anchor of identity politics is reinforced by the particular institutional arrangement that currently governs Albanians in Kosovo, where lack of statehood is an obstacle to internal debate:<sup>6</sup> 'we cannot worry about freedom of expression now, we have to be independent first', is the comment of a teacher.

Albanians in Kosovo are concerned with self-determination and independence, objectives they believe to be consistent with the legal and political framework of decolonisation. The continuing presence of an international trusteeship embodies the denial of this aspiration. It translates into a surrogate state that constitutes the local society as an object of protection, teaching and regulation, but not as an independent agency with its own history. This has narrowed the focus of local actors to the essential core of independence-statehood earned through the heroic struggle against foreign domination. It has kept criticism below the surface and reinforced the unifying power of the master narrative. In the words of a prominent local journalist, 'It is the internationals that have pushed Albanians towards folklore.' Although there is no evidence that Albanians are deaf to the values of democracy and human rights, local control over territory and security, i.e. Kosovo independent statehood, still takes precedence over respect for diversity, least of all for ethnic minorities.

### The Legendary Commander

The events that began the myth of Prekaz and the legendary commander Adem Jashari took place over three days, from 5 to 7 March 1998. Adem Jashari was among the founders of a small, clandestine organisation: the

*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* or UÇK (from now on KLA, Kosovo Liberation Army). This armed group was fighting for independence from Yugoslavia after Belgrade's revocation of Kosovo's autonomy, and claimed responsibility for several attacks on the police. Its actions broke the 'truce' established in 1991 between the Serb state and an Albanian self-styled independent parallel society. Adem Jashari, identified by Serb security services as a KLA leader, became a wanted man well before March. The police launched a first heavy assault against the Jashari family house in December 1991, but were repelled by its occupants' unexpectedly fierce resistance. During a second short siege on 22 January 1998, they wounded Adem Jashari's teenage daughter Iliriana and his niece Selvete. Once again, Jashari escaped arrest. The final siege followed a few days after a violent twenty-four-hour police sweep through the nearby hamlets of Likoshan and Qirez, in apparent retaliation for an earlier KLA action in late February when local guerrillas ambushed and killed five policemen. A house-to-house search for the perpetrators of that attack resulted in the deaths of twenty-three Albanians, including a pregnant woman and ten male members of one family with no ties to the KLA; it was the first large-scale civilian killing, and the level of ferocity took everyone by surprise.

On 5 March a large deployment of mixed Serb forces, including police and Special Forces armed with heavy artillery, sealed off the area surrounding the Jashari compound and attacked. Three days later the assault ended, with one dead and several wounded among the police, and fifty-one dead among the extended Jashari family. Twenty bodies – some charred and unidentifiable – were all that remained of the immediate family. Besarta, the eleven-year-old daughter of Adem Jashari's brother Hamzë, was the only survivor.<sup>7</sup>

The representation of Adem Jashari as the legendary commander began in the immediate aftermath of the event, when he became the rallying point for KLA recruits in Kosovo and abroad. At first there was confusion over the news. Capitalising on this, KLA members spread the rumor of Adem Jashari's miraculous escape and survival.<sup>8</sup> They created the image of the larger-than-life commander and contributed to the myth of the hero's eternal life by linking him to the early twentieth century Albanian rebel, Azem Galica, also believed to be alive after his actual death. Besarta provided the only eye-witness account of the events, which quickly consolidated into a coherent story of heroism in the face of a much stronger enemy. She related that all the Jasharis participated in the battle, while 'uncle Adem' sang patriotic songs (Colvin 1998; Hamzaj and Hoti 2003: 91–5). The tale of the massacre fed material to local teachers and journalists, who became national historians overnight, and quickly articulated the themes of the myth – resistance unto death, sacrifice for the love of country and immortality – through a rich production of oral accounts and written literature. Already from early press reports Jashari emerged as 'the builder of a new era' (*Zëri* 1998: 21), and the events of March 1998 became 'a turning point', shifting the course of history from oppression to freedom.

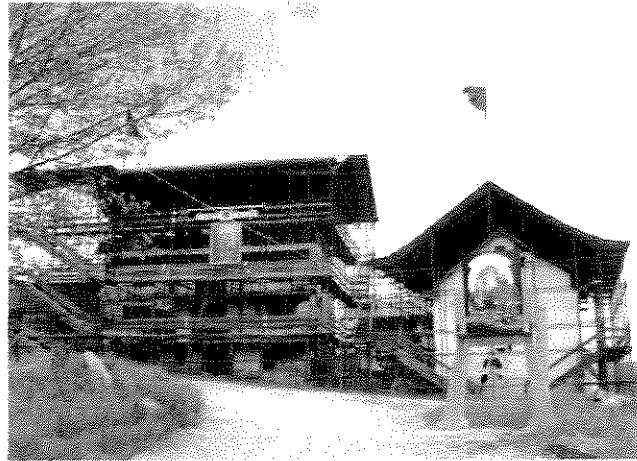


Figure 1. Memorial complex 'Adem Jashari', Prekaz, May 2004.

After the war, social reproduction of the Jashari legend became ubiquitous, and is evident in the many schools, barracks, squares and streets all over Kosovo that are named after him. There are many representations of Adem Jashari as a brave warrior – in popular songs, postcards, calendars, medals, posters, copper plates, watches, notebooks and other souvenirs. Designed to encourage recognition, this merchandise is on sale at the gift shop of the Prekaz Memorial Complex, a park enclosing the three bombed houses of the Jashari family and the nearby cemetery (see Figure 1). For large numbers of Albanians from the region and abroad, this whole site is a shrine and its sacredness is defined, in a Durkheimian sense, by the simple fact that the place and its people are set apart from the ordinary, the profane. Murat Jashari, Adem Jashari's nephew, interprets the mythic proportion of his family's story succinctly and clearly:

Each nation has a saint and a story that is the foundation that forms the society, its basis. My family's story is the link of a chain, a historical movement. History is a chain that goes back to the Albanian flag, Azem Galica, Shaban Palluzha and others. Albanians have always been under an oppressive foreign power, whether Turkey, Austria, Serbia, and there have been many moments of fighting for freedom: this is the Albanian national question in the Balkans.<sup>9</sup>

Keeping the Jashari foundational myth alive are family members, former KLA combatants (who when they were demobilised became the civil defence organisation *Trupat të Mbrojtës të Kosovës* or TMK, Kosovo Protection Corps, KPC), veterans' associations, politicians, rural teachers and journalists. Many of these memory entrepreneurs live in the cities and in the capital, Pristina, but are in large part from the central rural area of Drenica, Jashari's home, and from the border regions of Dukagjin and Llap, where state repression was much more strongly exercised by the Yugoslav central govern-

ment and where, during the war, the greatest brutality occurred. They are engaged in celebrating the cult of Jashari through ceremonies, memorials, fundraising, narrating the story through all forms of media, and writing its history in commercial books as well as in education primers. Under the sponsorship of the Prime Minister's Office, their annual commemoration of the Jashari massacre has become a national celebration, a three-day affair that includes a military-style parade by the KPC, an invitation-only solemn gathering (since 2003), and an all-night pageant with traditional music and dances around bonfires. These events are widely covered by all Kosovo media, and the public TV station provides live coverage.

There is nothing unique to Kosovo in this construction of a national legend. In order to support their claim to nationhood many other groups have established links between recent historical events and a more remote, but distinctive past. Like the founding myth of the battle of Tel Hai and the legendary hero Trumpeldor of the 1920s Jewish society of Palestine (Zerubavel 1994), and like the siege and battle of the Alamo in Texas in 1836 ending with the epic death of Davy Crockett (Brear 1995), the story of Prekaz and Adem Jashari provides a very powerful narration and link to memory. All these massacres mark a break with the present, and give impulse to new actions grounded in a chosen, inspirational past. The protagonists were killed but are not represented as vanquished; they are not considered victims, but as heroes who knew no surrender. They are in fact called *dëshmorët e kombit* (martyrs of the nation), which is not the same as *shahid* (Islamic martyr of Jihad), although the Jasharis, like the overwhelming majority of Albanians in Kosovo, are Muslim. They are martyrs in the original sense of 'witness to the cause', as present in Christian and Islamic theologies: although nationhood is denied them, they testify with their martyrdom that the nation does exist.

The figure of Adem Jashari had all the elements crucial to becoming a legend. In the context of the time, especially in 1998, when more than 300 Albanian civilians were killed by Serb forces in separate 'ordinary massacres',<sup>10</sup> Prekaz stands out as an extraordinary case. The Jasharis were not simply gunned down, they responded to fire with fire. Adem Jashari became the first symbol of a different Albanian type to the oppressed but pacifist one that was dominant in the 1990s; he marked an important change in popular attitudes, as Albanians followed his example and joined as *vullnetare* ('volunteers') of the armed insurrection in their thousands. The Adem Jashari legend thus provides a powerful counter-narrative to the one of victimisation and accommodation with the enemy. A young KPC cadet described what he felt during his many visits to the Prekaz Complex as a sense of national pride – 'there, we all feel proud of being Albanian' – a comment heard from many other visitors to the Jashari shrine.

Born and raised in the rural society of the Drenica region, Adem Jashari is easily identifiable with other local heroic figures; he is the perfect embodiment of the 'authentic Albanian patriot' in opposition to the 'putative Yugoslav corruption' of the urban population through the state's dispensation of

political and financial benefits. In a very modern fashion, he appeared to have already constructed himself as a legendary figure. He is reported to have styled himself on the Albanian rebel leader against the Ottomans, Çerçiz Topulli. His nephew, Bashkim, who escaped the siege on the first day of the assault, remembers that in the morning Adem Jashari sang patriotic songs, one of them from the soundtrack of the 1979 film *Liri A Vdekje* (Freedom or Death), a popular Albanian biopic on Topulli (Hamzaj and Hoti 2003: 103). Other personal testimonies recall a man who spoke in theatrical sentences when the occasion warranted, as in the address to his comrades following the attack on police at Likoshan: 'You are wounded today so we can be free tomorrow.'<sup>11</sup>

The development of Adem Jashari's legend after 1998 expands the individual fate of the hero by placing it in the framework of a northern Albania/Kosovo cultural and political lexicon that resonates particularly with people from rural areas. Rural traditionalist suggestions are consciously woven into the core narrative, such that the legend is told and retold in the local style of epic folk songs. They celebrate the place, Drenica, 'the mountains', and the typical accessories of the Albanian warrior heroes: the gun, occasionally the *çifteli* (a two-stringed mandolin-type of instrument), the *kulla* (defensive house) and the *oda* (room reserved for men's gathering), where the elders routinely recite the heroic epics of Albanian patriotic rebels (Halimi and Shala 2000: 14). All these themes, which are the stock in trade of Albanian folklore, constituted a living experience for the Jasharis. The patriarch, Shaban, knew by heart the 15,613-line verse epic *Lahuta e Malcis* (The Highland Lute) chronicling the history of Albanians from 1863 through 1913 as a long fight for freedom. We learned this from a relative whose father, a teacher, introduced the text to Drenica in the 1950s, when books written in Albanian were still illegal; like many others at the time, he memorised the poem to recite it in the *oda*.

In rural areas all over Kosovo, the *oda* was and still is the main space of social gathering among men, where the art of story-telling is kept alive. For an older businessman born in Drenica, and who emigrated to New York in the 1960s, it was 'a school of life'. 'Everything I heard in the *oda* is still inscribed in my head' said a former KLA commander who hailed from a village in the southern municipality of Gjilan – 'I still remember the first time I entered the *oda*, I was 13 years old, they were singing the song of Fazli Graiçefci<sup>12</sup> and even just talking about it now gives me goose bumps.' An eighteen-year-old youth from the eastern village of Theranda explained, 'When we had no schools and nowhere to go, we stayed in the *oda*, where we learned about our country, our people, and the tradition; and we heard songs, and hung out with friends.'

The stories told in the *oda*, like the new songs written in honour of Adem Jashari, also celebrate the key concept of 'faithfulness' to one's word – 'loyalty' or 'allegiance guarantee', the *besa*, taken from traditional customary law or *kanun*. This concept prescribes the obligations and relations to one's family

and to 'the friend' (*mik*), demanding internal solidarity, loyalty and commitment in conduct, as well as secrecy towards outsiders (Schwandner-Sievers 1999). *Besa* is at the core of the concept of the ancestor's will or 'pledge' (the *amanet*), as it demands eternal faithfulness to the cause – here that of fighting for national liberation, independence and unity – beyond an individual's life and through the generations. As the master narrative goes, Jashari unified the Albanian people and gave them the mission of building a nation. In the visitors' books at the Prekaz site many visitors explicitly accept Adem Jashari's *amanet*, his pledge for 'independence' and 'freedom' as a legacy whose fulfilment is entrusted to the living. The Jashari legend is an example of how the new national discourse appropriated a concept customarily based in the local, patriarchal social organisation and expanded a trans-generational, patriarchal family debt into a national obligation.

#### Discordant voices

As a national ideology rooted – both literally and figuratively – in the Kosovo traditional landscape, Jashari legend travels with some unease to the cities, and especially to the capital. Pristina is only 30 miles from Prekaz, and as an urban centre is only a half-century old, but is in many ways worlds apart from rural Kosovo. The seat of the provincial government, media and courts, as well as the largest university, Kosovo benefited more than any other centre from its proximity to the Yugoslav state and the communist power structure after gaining autonomy in the 1970s. It has been described in numerous accounts as populated by a middle class that remained unaware of, or indifferent to the suffering experienced in the rural areas during the war. It was half-emptied by Serb troops during the NATO intervention, but the destruction of property stopped with looting, which, although widespread, left residential structures intact and habitable. In the aftermath of the war Pristina has grown in size and acquired even greater prominence over the rest of the province. There is a new concentration of international headquarters and diplomatic presence, and of new political elites risen from the war experience who are taking important positions in the Assembly and the government; and a multitude of displaced rural people who left the ruins of their homes to rebuild their lives in the city. The countryside has come to the capital, but has by no means conquered it.

In Pristina we heard many subterranean voices in discord with the cult of Adem Jashari. However, they have not structured themselves into a counter-narrative, since any public criticism of the legendary commander amounts to blasphemy. We heard critical comments in private conversations, mostly defined as a rejection of traditionalism. Whether manifested in the monumental art that reproduces the Jashari myth materially, or in the subtext of the Jashari family tale of life and death, traditionalism becomes aesthetically distasteful, and the myth becomes a source of private disagreement.



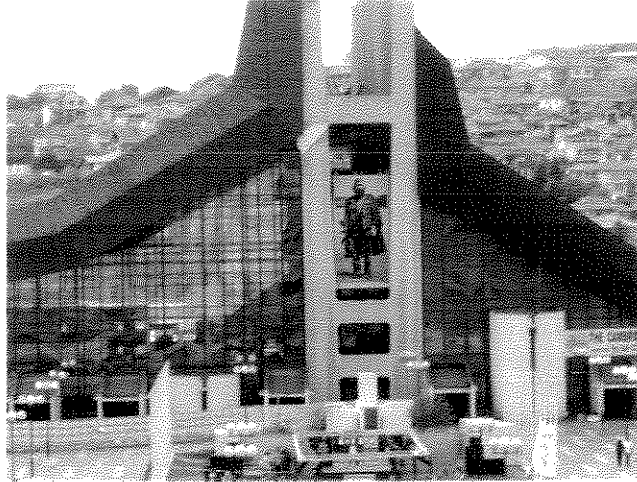


Figure 2. 'Adem Jashari' overlooking Pristina, May 2004.

On 28 November 2004, a statue of Adem Jashari was unveiled in the centre of the homonymous square in Skenderaj, the municipal city of Prekaz. A modernist aesthetic rooted in socialist memorial iconography characterises this monument, like most other representations of Jashari (see Figure 2). Such representations, while satisfying to some, alienate many city dwellers who see themselves as more educated and cosmopolitan than the *katundar* (the peasant). Their criticism implies no blanket opposition to memorialisation: for example, the new KLA memorial – an exact copy of the Washington DC Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, erected just outside Skenderaj – has received overwhelming approval among the same critics. Their reaction against the backwardness of the socialist aesthetic is rather against what seems foreign to the western world they want to belong to, and of which they think they have always been part. 'Where are we, in North Korea?' was the rhetorical question of a Pristina NGO activist, commenting on the unveiling of the Jashari statue in Skenderaj, as it was solemnly celebrated and given wide coverage by all broadcasters.

Urban women offer a differently focused criticism. That they would be keen to distance themselves from the Jashari legend is not surprising. The myth of heroic personal sacrifice sanctioned by blood is a cultural signifier of patriarchy, and the Jashari legend exhibits strong gendered qualities. These latter specifically reassert the social order and masculine ideals characteristic of the Albanian tradition, an order that sidelines and marginalises women in the public sphere. A young professional woman in Pristina, expressing a sentiment that we heard many times in other private conversations, said to us: 'If you asked me, I would tell you that Adem Jashari was crazy. Nobody has the right to get his children and wife killed. But I would not give my opinion in

front of anyone, and if you did it for me, I would deny I ever said it.' At stake here are contested notions of family morality, especially the rights and the obligations of a father. What kind of man would sacrifice his own children to a cause, no matter how good it is? This question implies a negative judgement of the reputed primitivism of the Jasharis, defined by a patriarchal culture which allows the father total ownership of his family.

The hegemonic discourse of the post-war master narrative makes it more difficult for women to challenge their subordination in the patriarchal order that still assigns them and their children to the husband's family, let alone claim leadership in a society that is construed as having been built by men. There is no public debate on this issue. The play *War-less* by Jeta Xharra touches exactly upon the drama of those, especially women, to whom the mythical aspects of war deny a place in post-war Kosovo. It was performed in London in 2004, in English, because the author believes this is no time for its theatrical release in Albanian at home.<sup>13</sup> Women have no significant place in the official and private memorials dedicated to martyrs of the struggle. Yet, a small number also joined the KLA. They certainly played a crucial supporting role in the armed resistance. Women were messengers, auxiliaries, cooks, and nurses – functions that enjoy no celebration after the conclusion of a war. As in most societies, as victims of war they were raped and killed by the enemy, but then forgotten. The widespread and systematic rape that occurred during the war received public attention only at the time of the conflict, while in post-war Kosovo the issue of rape as a war crime has disappeared from political discourse altogether, leaving the victims to deal with their tragedy in private.

Finally, the role of women in the peaceful, civil resistance to the Belgrade regime in the 1990s has been completely sidelined. Many were held back in the general context of loss of jobs, but many also staffed schools and hospitals in the self-help society that Kosovo had become. Political activists suffered from imprisonment and torture. Today, as then, the recognition of women's role in society is largely muted and subordinated to the 'national question'. Criticism of the traditionalist, rural based discourse reflects a debate that plays out an older distinction between the country and the city as backwardness versus civilisation. Many Albanian city dwellers – in a fashion typical of internal 'nesting Orientalism' – have always looked down on the 'backward' peasants of the villages, transferring to them the stereotypical generalisations of 'backwardness' ascribed to all Albanians in the dominating mental maps of the former Yugoslavia (Bakic-Hayden 1995). This phenomenon visibly manifests itself in politics through the emergence of young new leaders who have little or no relations with the urban pre-war elites still prominent in Kosovo. Although almost all post-war politicians hold university degrees, in some cases earned abroad, they are still the object of extreme common criticism for their alleged lack of sophistication. 'They are peasants. Peasants have always been good fighters, but they should not claim political power', was a comment made during a conversation

with a family in Gjlan, but heard many times elsewhere, with minor variations.

Although the focus on the cities, and especially Pristina, is useful and appropriate in interpreting cultural oppositions to the master narrative, an interlocking political issue that is not exclusively urban in character also needs to be considered: the preference for non-violent means to achieve the goal of independence. Following the war, the founding myth of the warrior hero has replaced that of peaceful opposition to the 1990s Belgrade regime – in the form of the parallel society under President Ibrahim Rugova, leader of the *Lidhje Demokratike e Kosovës* (LDK, Democratic League of Kosovo)<sup>14</sup> – which was at one point celebrated as Gandhian. Many of those who made that choice at the time still disagree with the armed resistance. They belong to a broad social and geographical spectrum – the amorphous 'grey zone', to use a re-elaboration of Primo Levi's notion – of conformists, who found an accommodation with the apartheid of the parallel society.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1990s life was oppressive for Albanians, but many had adjusted to it. The choice of civil resistance had rendered further violence by the Milosevic regime unnecessary. Forced to suppress the KLA rebellion – so the interpretation goes – the regime was forced to become more brutal. The implicit conclusion is that the KLA contributed to the spiralling process of war and violence. Some people told us that during the war they had put their weapons away because they wanted to avoid provoking the police and endangering their families. A widow said that she would rather have her dead husband back than a 'liberated Kosovo'. In conversations with Rahovac residents we heard the argument that if it wasn't for the KLA's quixotic attempt to occupy the town in July 1998, Serb troops would not have retaliated with the civilian massacre that followed. All these voices remain strictly private, since holding the KLA – the victors – responsible for innocent deaths is not an argument that can be made in public.

We suggest that one hypothesis for the public dominance of the Prekaz master narrative is its foundation on a collective trauma capable of eliciting strong collective identification among Albanian communities. Although the patriarch's role in the death of the Jashari might be the object of denunciation, the story of the Jashari massacre provides a heightened and condensed symbolism for an intense suffering that resonates with many and unites them in a national community. When asked for an explanation of their unwillingness to criticise Adem Jashari publicly, many of our respondents told us that his extraordinary sacrifice, which is impossible to repay in equal terms, bound them to feel gratitude. Although they reject the master narrative's reconfiguration of civil resistance under Rugova as the collaborationism of a suspiciously compliant party, they do retrospectively accept the claim that without Jashari and the will to fight, Kosovo would still be an apartheid society. Thousands of Albanian families have experienced violent death, imprisonment and/or loss of private property because of the Serb state's policies. The Jashari story, as constructed, is a progressive narrative

that has made a powerful connection between this suffering and deliverance from it.

### **Local and international memories**

The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has been mandated primarily to provide an interim government and build a multi-ethnic society until the final status of Kosovo is defined. The paradox is that with the advent of the provisional institutions of self-government, post-war Kosovo has become a peculiar construct. It is a territory with a President, an Assembly, ministries and a civil defence organisation – the Kosovo Protection Corps – that is angling to become an army. Yet, it lacks any attribute of sovereignty and remains under the tutelage of an international protectorate. In diplomatic language this is often referred to as ‘creative ambiguity’; abandoning this euphemism, a recent independent UN report calls it ‘lack of direction and overall plan provided by the international community’, and is the reason why UNMIK has been mainly used to ‘keep the lid on’ (Eide 2004: para. 11). As long as this situation persists, and local Serbs refuse to participate in the polity and depend on Belgrade for salaries and services, Albanians continue to be constituted as the sole subjects of UNMIK. One example illustrates this condition: as carriers of UNMIK travel documents, substituting Yugoslav passports, Albanians in Kosovo are classified as a unique group, and identified only by their ethnicity (Blumi 2003). Under the international protectorate, Albanians in Kosovo experience their much desired independence simply as ‘freedom from Serbs’, an experience that reinforces ethnic identity and solidarity.

One example, centered on Prekaz, is particularly telling. In October 2003, French NATO troops entered into an armed confrontation with Murat Jashari and other survivors, after having searched their property for weapons for two days. They had no warrant, which is not legally required for NATO troops in Kosovo, but was requested by the Jasharis as a precondition for compliance. Emotions ran high, not only in Prekaz but everywhere, as the incident brought back painful memories of war. A wild rumour, totally unsubstantiated it turned out, spread among Albanians that French soldiers had roamed the Jashari property drunk and singing, a characterisation explicitly associating French with the behavior of Serb troops during the war. By watching TV coverage of the event, and talking with both the protagonists of that incident and those who merely discussed it in the cafes of the capital, we found there was a remarkable solidarity with the Jasharis. This consensus mirrored the one in the political leadership. We understood that existing criticism of the Jashari legend quickly dissipates when the family, a symbol of Albanian independence from foreign interference, comes under attack.

On that occasion, Murat Jashari had been particularly offended by the lack of respect shown to the family shrine by the soldiers; they had driven across

the massacre site, thus violating a 'sacred space'.<sup>16</sup> He had also been offended by the suggestion that his family was involved in illegal activities. Wilful indifference and ignorance have largely characterised the international actors' attitude towards the Jashari legend and its iconic role among Albanians. This attitude is consistent with the refusal to engage with local self-understanding of nationhood, and reinforces the gap between two societies and two realities – the international and the local.

Our ethnography suggests that international administrators do not see the Albanian host society as a political subject shaped by a specific history, in which interaction – and contention – with state power and with the international administration, plays a decisive part. They largely understand it through the lens of such de-politicised categorisations as victim or perpetrators. At the time of the 'humanitarian intervention' – then a notion itself at the centre of an intense debate – international actors had assumed Albanians to be innocent victims, temporarily suspending their judgement on the KLA guerrilla. At the symbolic level, this understanding was based on the transfer of Holocaust imagery first to Bosnia and later to Kosovo. There is ample evidence that memories of World War II influenced many, especially the decision of the US diplomatic corps (Albright 2003: 382; Clark 2001: 11); and the Holocaust was later invoked to justify the NATO military intervention, which was understood as a 'redemptive' action for the failure to stop the killings not only during World War II but also the Bosnian war (Levy and Sznajder 2002: 99). When, in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, most Serbs either left Kosovo or were pushed to leave by a climate of violence and intimidation, the term 'reversed ethnic cleansing' came to be widely used to imply collective Albanian responsibility.<sup>17</sup> After the war, Serbs became victims.

Extensive observation and interviews confirm that the majority of the 'internationals', as foreign military and civilians are commonly called, have little or no memory of the March 1998 events, let alone any intention of visiting Prekaz. If they do know of Prekaz, they keep their distance – literally and figuratively – from the site. A senior international official accompanied us once to the Memorial but refused to leave the car for fear of being seen at the site. 'They don't want to be perceived as taking sides', a Western diplomat thus explained the attitude of most of his colleagues. With the exception of the first UN Head Administrator of Kosovo, Bernard Kouchner, formal visits by other high profile officials have had, until recently, an accidental quality.

Compare this with the central role that the cult of Adem Jashari plays in the local theatre of power politics. Despite political rivalries<sup>18</sup> and private discord, this most sacred symbol of national martyrdom and its affirmation of pride remains the obligatory reference point for politicians of all colours, whose shared priority is still Kosovo independence. At the outset of the 2004 electoral campaign, the publisher Veton Surroi and his new party *Ora* made the point of making a highly publicised visit to the Prekaz Memorial. President Ibrahim Rugova\* who before 1998 persistently claimed that the

KLA was an invention of Serb secret services, and always refused to be associated in any way with the KLA,<sup>19</sup> has an uneasy relationship with the Jasharis. Rugova has never visited Prekaz. His supporters say this is because he was never invited and fears a negative or even violent reception, while his detractors maintain that he does not care about the site. Nonetheless, even he seeks association with Jashari. On several occasions *Bota Sot*, the newspaper close to his party, published a photograph that shows Rugova at a meeting in Tirana in the early 1990s with Adem Jashari standing behind him.<sup>20</sup> This was to prove a political relationship between the two leaders when in fact none existed, as well as to denounce rival political leader and KLA representative Hashim Thaçi's<sup>21</sup> use of an allegedly falsified photograph of himself with Jashari. The picture shows Jashari with his arm around Thaçi's shoulders and has been reproduced in calendars and as a poster in *Epoka e Re*, the newspaper close to Thaçi's party, with a caption, 'Legends have a future'. Recently, we have detected the rise of a counter-narrative that locates Adem Jashari squarely in the Rugova camp. 'Jashari was Rugova's body guard . . . the President sent him to Albania to train as a fighter', said a young student, debating with a KLA sympathiser. An LDK supporter suggested that the KLA has hijacked the memory of Adem Jashari, who in life had been 'pragmatic, and certainly on Rugova's side'.

Much of this debate is dismissed as local folklore by international administrators. For them, redressing the situation created after the war by the flight of thousands of Serbs from Kosovo, became a priority that required a quick 'resetting' of Kosovo to a timeless present of multi-ethnic tolerance. There is little or no patience with any appreciation of Albanian perspectives on the recent past of Kosovo. Pushed to the side, the latter find a loose but important unity in the memory – and commemoration – of Prekaz. Prekaz invites everyone to resist the call to a collective amnesia – about selective remembering – about local history implicitly made by international actors.

The national myth-making activity of Albanian memory entrepreneurs in Kosovo has used cultural scripts taken from a patriarchal tradition. They are based on the notion of resistance until death and the trans-generational obligation to remember and complete the work of martyrs. Unlike the Jewish prescription to remember, *zakhor*, the transmission of the past to the present and future generations is commanded by customary law, rather than religious texts, but it has a similar force (Yerushalmi 1982). It relies on traditional practices of story-telling, in which history, legend and personal memories are mixed. Here, the story-teller and the historian are the same person. They have woven this storyline for an independent Kosovo: a nation liberated from Serb rule after a long and bloody resistance, revived through the heroic sacrifice of the legendary commander Adem Jashari.

This is a master narrative that elicits contestations and disagreements, but currently serves as the icon of unity around which Albanians rally for two

\*Please refer to postscript.

important and related reasons. First, memories of the dead and of collective suffering constitute a shared past for Albanians in Kosovo that cannot easily be put aside. Second, the international agenda, in attempting to impose its own universalistic, abstract values and create a multi-ethnic society, appears to be an obstacle to the local state-building project. As the rhetoric employed by UNMIK continues to classify local actors in terms of the apolitical categories of 'victims' or 'perpetrators', 'deserving' or 'undeserving' victims, the Albanian storyline, centred on heroic resistance, reaffirms Albanian agency and its commitment to winning independence.

There might be implicit discord between urban and rural worlds in Kosovo and along other lines of division, such as gender and politics, as with any complex society, but the master narrative performs two functions. Retrospectively, it has shifted the focus from 'shameful' experiences of victimisation/humiliation to imparting pride. Prospectively, it provides an icon of national solidarity, strengthens Albanian national political identity and makes the claim to independence non-negotiable. The dead, who have fallen, to free Kosovo, are now positioned to motivate and mobilise future resistance if felt necessary.

#### Postscript

Since the submission of this article, President Ibrahim Rugova died on 21 January 2006. His death, covered worldwide by the media, drew a significant international diplomatic representation to the funeral, allowing the staging of a 'state' ceremony for a locally much beloved and fatherly symbol of Kosovo independence. Conspicuously absent were the Jashari family, the KPC honour guard headed by Jashari's friend and neighbour Nuredin Lushtaku and some KLA veterans, angry at the decision to bury the pacifist President side by side the KLA martyrs in Pristina. By this decision, the LDK placed Rugova in the plot of the Jashari master-narrative, threatening to 'highjack' the iconic position of Adem Jashari, and widening the rift among former KLA leaders from different regions of Kosovo. Rugova's death enhanced the non-combatants' moral authority, currently subterranean, for potentially gaining the strength and coherence of a public counter-narrative.

#### Notes

1 For the name of the region itself, Kosovo, and the capital Pristina, we have used the common English spelling. For the names of all other localities we have complied with the terminology used by our Albanian respondents. The international standards would include both Albanian and Serbian spelling: Kosova/Kosovo; Gjilan/Gnjilane; Likoshan/Likošane; Qirez/Æeirez; Prekaz/Donji Prekaz; Prishtinë/Priština; Skenderaj/Srbica; and (Theranda) Suharekë/Suva Reka.

2 The *OED* and *Webster* define massacre as 'indiscriminate killing of human beings' and 'overwhelming defeat'.

3 The formation of nation-states from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire divided the administrative provinces that were mostly inhabited by an Albanian-speaking population: Kosovo, Janina, İşkodra and Monastir. A Pan-Albanian national community would include the descendants of that population and its territory.

4 We have developed the themes of the Jashari site and the pilgrimage more in depth in another article (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006).

5 We interviewed several hundred people of different ages, gender and social status in Kosovo and the Diaspora. Of these, 100 are formal interviews, which vary from short comments to longer conversations, often repeated over the years. We also conducted unstructured group and family interviews, and systematic focus group research. Our ethnography includes international administrators.

6 When on occasion intellectual debates argue on Kosovar identity, as briefly in the weekly *Java* during 2001–02, they focus on the relation between Kosovo and Albania, and the Jashari cult and war memories are not questioned.

7 Human rights organisations (KMLDNJ 1998; Amnesty International 1998; Humanitarian Law Center 1998), as well as the world media, investigated the Prekaz events. Serb police records reported that the Jasharis attacked the police, and not vice versa (Federal Republic 2000: 346).

8 Interview with KLA founder and Commander Rexhep Selimi, Pristina, 9 November 2004. When news agencies reported that he too had been killed in Prekaz, Selimi thought he could exploit the confusion: 'Thinking that I was dead my family was so desperate, that . . . they told a friend to come and see with his eyes . . . I reassured him and said that Adem was as alive as I was, only hiding in the mountains.'

9 Interview with Murat Jashari, Prekaz, 19 November 2004.

10 We borrow the term 'ordinary massacre' from historians who write about the German army killing thousands of civilians in occupied Italy (1943–45) and in the context of a war that blurred the distinction between civilians and combatants. The number of civilians massacred in Kosovo during 1998 refers to a count based on KMLDNJ and Human Rights Watch records about civilian killings in Lybeniq, Poklek i Ri, Rrasa e Zogut, Rahovac, Dragobel, Rancee, Galica, Klina and Abria e Eperme.

11 Interview with KLA veteran Commander Sabrit Lladrovici, Pristina, 7 March 2005.

12 Albanian nationalist militant died in detention in 1968.

13 Interview with Jeta Xharra, 11 March 2005.

14 Dr Ibrahim Rugova, President of the Writers' Association, was one of the founders of the LDK in 1989. In 1992 he was elected President of the Kosovo self-styled Republic.

15 Levi writes about the 'sphere of ambiguity and compromise' that comprises the majority of the subaltern society to an overpowering repressive authority (Levi 1989: 67, 36–69).

16 Interview with Murat Jashari, Prekaz, 28 October 2003.

17 See Kofi Annan's statement (14 October 1999) in [www.un.org/peace/Kosovo/news/99/pct99\\_2.htm](http://www.un.org/peace/Kosovo/news/99/pct99_2.htm) and a KFOR Spokesperson's press release of 1 November 1999 in [www.nato.int/kosovo/press/1999/k991101a.htm](http://www.nato.int/kosovo/press/1999/k991101a.htm)

18 There has been a highly public struggle, complete with criss-crossing accusations alternatively of treachery, criminal activities and murder, fighting in the media (Di Lellio 2005) and in court between opposite factions of the armed resistance.

19 Interview with Rugova's spokesman until 1998, 15 September 2005.

20 Cover Page (*Bota Sot* 2004).

21 Hashim Thaçi, from Drenica, was a student leader who emigrated to Switzerland, an early member of the KLA and founder of the *Partia Demokratike e Kosovës* (Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK).

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