



The Role of the Albanian Revivalists from Macedonia on Education in Native Language (1895-1912)

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Abstract:

Albanians in Macedonia during the period from 1895 to 1912 faced significant hindrances in their educational and cultural advancement. Among the foremost challenges was the widespread illiteracy within the population. The education of Albanians overseas, primarily in Constantinople, played a pivotal role in its obliteration. The collective efforts of Albanian activists and intellectuals were directed towards the expression and affirmation of national culture and education in their native language. Alongside Albanian revivalists adhering to Islam, exemplified by figures like Rexhep Voka and Hamdi Ohri, and Orthodox ones led by Josif Bageri, Albanian Protestants in Macedonia, notably the Qiriazi family from Bitola, emerged as prominent contributors, namely the bearers of the entire educational and cultural endeavors of Albanians in the Bitola Province at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Key words: Albanian revivalists, Macedonia, education, native language.

Rexhep Voka and his ideas on language in education

Limited information exists regarding the life of Rexhep Voka from Tetovo. In 1868, he enrolled at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Constantinople, securing employment upon graduation. By 1903, Rexhep Voka was appointed mufti in the Bitola Province. Actively engaged in the "Bashkimi" ("Unity") association, he represented Tetovo at the Albanian assembly in Ferizaj (August 1908), as well as at the Congress in Debar. Rexhep Voka's literary repertoire comprises three known works: "Elifbaja shqip" ("Koran Primer in Albanian"), printed in Constantinople in 1910, where he devised an alphabet for the Albanian language utilizing Arabic letters, assigning distinct sign for each sound. In 1911, a publication titled "Arnavudçe müefessal ilmihal" ("Fundamental

Religious Principles in Albanian") was printed in Constantinople. Concurrently, he released a collection titled "Mendime" ("Thoughts") in the same year, spanning 16 pages, where he publicly and clearly addresses the backwardness of Albanians and advocates for the imperative establishment of schools teaching in the native language (Bartl 2004, 177–178; Voka 1991, 3-5; Ibrahim 2017, 685).

The "Mahfel" Club (a cultural club in Thessaloniki), where Rexhep Voka held membership, was under the complete sway of the Young Turks. Recognizing Rexhep Voka's talent, they persuaded him to publish "Elifbaja shqip" (The Primer) along with two books utilizing the Arabic script. Following the publication of the Primer, Rexhep Voka faced severe criticism from the Albanian press of the time, enduring vehement insults and derogatory labels. Moreover, he was falsely attributed with involvement in activities unrelated to him, such as organizing demonstrations in support of the Arabic alphabet (Mustafa 1995, 62–63).

Rexhep Voka maintained a steadfast stance on matters of ignorance, division based on religion, and the national issue. He advocated for the cause of national, linguistic, and cultural unity. Taking the Islamic rules as a basis, he upheld respect for national, religious, and linguistic diversity. In his own words, "A person devoid of faith and knowledge is akin to be alive but deemed lifeless. I pray to God that there be no Albanian devoid of faith. The humanity of man lies in faith and knowledge, while animals subsist merely on sustenance". "Let us expunge malevolence from our hearts and embrace virtue and righteousness. Let us refrain from labeling this one a Muslim, that one a Christian, one as a Tosk, and another as a Gheg, for we are all Albanian of the same descent. We should agree, we have the same roots, so we need to safeguard our Albanian name and refrain from bringing shame upon ourselves in the eyes of others,

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we need to stand behind our word and have hope”
(Voka (1991): 10, 15-16).

Josif Bageri – Orthodox Albanian from Gostivar

Josif Bageri was active in the Albanian colony in Sofia from 1887. Since the beginning of the association “*Dëshira*” (“*Desire*”) he was one of the founders and among its most active members. In May 1910, he started printing the newspaper “*Shqypeja e Shqypënis*” (“*The Eagle of Albania*”) in Sofia, which played a major role in spreading educational ideas among Albanians. In 1910, in Sofia, he published the book of poems and short stories “*Kopshti i malësorit*” (“*The Garden of the Peasant*”), which was also used as reading material in schools (Bageri (1995): 7-8).

In 1902, Josif Bageri expressed in “*Drita*” (“*Light*”): “*The Turks and Albanians do not share common blood or language; they are distinct nations. If the Ottoman Empire fails to grant them their political rights and meet their demands, then the only recourse left is the autonomy of Albania*” (Соколова (1979): 81).

On 20 August 1908, Josif Bageri received correspondence from Albanian revivalists Shahin Kolonja, Kristo Luarasi, and Midhat Frasheri, urging his return from Bulgaria. Additionally, letters from his fellow countrymen in Debar implored him to come back and establish a school with Albanian-language instruction. Josif Bageri responded affirmatively to these appeals. To attain this goal, Josif Bageri commenced his journey on 7 September 1908. Upon his arrival in Debar, he promptly petitioned the authorities for the establishment of an Albanian-language school. He finally got the permit, but not for Debar, but for his native village, Nistrovo. Without further delay, he commenced enrolling children for instruction in their native language.

Josif Bageri traversed all the villages in the region, advocating for brotherhood, unity, and education in their native language. For instructional materials, Bageri utilized textbooks he brought from Constantinople (Idrizi (1997): 114-115).

In the newspaper “*Shqypeja e Shqypënis*” (“*The Eagle of Albania*”) he criticized the stance and policies of the Great Powers. This newspaper reported on the internal situation of the territories with a majority Albanian population. A key role in the orientation of the newspaper was played by its director and editor, Josif Bageri, according to whom Austro-Hungary and Italy had political claims on the Albanian territories (Соколова (1979): 138-139).

Hamdi Ohri, the first Albanian teacher from Ohrid

Hamdi Ohri is one of the most prominent Albanian revivalists from Macedonia. He contributed significantly on the establishment of schools offering education in Albanian. Throughout his lifetime, he faced internment, detention, and even death sentences, from which he was saved twice, yet he remained resolute. Hamdi Ohri was born in Ohrid and finished his elementary education there before attending high school at the gymnasium in Bitola. At the age of 16, he went to Constantinople, where he pursued his studies in Law.

In 1895, he returned to his hometown, immersing himself in the educational and cultural movements in Debar and its environs. In 1895, he was detained and incarcerated in Bitola. While in detention, he taught his fellow countrymen to read and write in their mother tongue. He compiled a bilingual Turkish-Albanian dictionary in prison. He was released in 1899.

Immediately after returning home, he opened the first school in Ohrid with instruction in the Albanian language. Hamdi-beg's engagement in educational and cultural endeavors did not escape the notice of authorities. In 1901, he found himself once more under arrest, subsequently imprisoned initially in Bitola, then later in Diyarbakir (Turkey), where he remained until 1908. After the Young Turk Revolution, Hamdi Ohri was elected president of the club “*Bashkimi*” (“*Unity*”) in Ohrid, as a representative of his hometown he participated in the Congress of the Alphabet (1908), the Congress in Elbasan (1909), the Second Bitola Congress (1910)) and the Declaration of Independence of Albania in Valona (1912).

As per Nexhat Abazi, Hamdi Ohri was proficient in ten languages, both in speech and writing. For the affirmation of the work he believed in and stood for, he traveled to Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia, Egypt, Italy, and various other countries. He passed away in 1938 in Tirana, where he spent his final years (Abazi (1997): 271–280).

The educational activity of the Qiriazi family from Bitola

In the history of Albanian people, particularly during the Awakening era, few families emerge who committed their entire moral, material, and spiritual resources to the national cause, particularly focusing on educational and cultural initiatives, akin to the Qiriazi family from Bitola (Dervishi (2018): 175–176).



Dimitri Qiriazhi vigilantly monitored the development of the Albanian national movement, particularly its cultural aspects. Since many languages were spoken in Bitola and different schools were attended, thus Dimitri's children spoke several languages, but they spoke only Albanian at home. Dimitri was elected president of the community of Orthodox Albanians in Bitola (Nexhipi (1996): 138–140).

Gjerasim Qiriazhi, born in Bitola around 1861 or 1862, distinguished himself through his educational and cultural endeavors, having completed his education at a Greek gymnasium in Bitola. In 1878, he enrolled at the American College in Samokov, Bulgaria, graduating in 1882. Notably, he conducted the first religious service in the Albanian language in Bitola and established a covert school offering instruction in Albanian. Gjerasim advocated for the publication of Albanian-language books through the association “*Vëllazëria*” (“*Brotherhood*”), with additional help from the association “*Drita*” (“*Light*”) based in Bucharest. He advocated for the inclusion of Albanian language instruction in Greek schools in Bitola and its vicinity. This was the main reason that led to his expulsion from the Orthodox faith by the Greek Metropolitanate. Gjerasim passed away in 1894 in Bitola (Nexhipi (1996): 141–145).

Following Gjerasim's demise, all official functions were taken over by his sibling, Gjergj Qiriazhi (born in 1865), who dedicated his entire life to political, social, educational, and cultural pursuits. He provided substantial assistance in the production of first Albanian-language textbooks, including a physics textbook, which was published in 1899 in Bucharest. Gjergj served as a member of the secret Albanian committee “*Për lirinë e Shqipërisë*” (“*For the freedom of Albania*”). He held positions as both secretary and president of the Albanian central club “*Bashkimi*” (“*Unity*”) in Bitola.

Gjergj played a pivotal role in the Bitola Congress; as recalled by his sister, he delivered the opening speech and extended greetings to the delegates. Alongside Fehim Zavalani, Gjergj Qiriazhi made a substantial contribution to the establishment of a printing house in Bitola in 1909 (Dervishi (2018): 175–176; Nexhipi (1996): 145–149)

Sevasti Qiriazhi, born in 1871, attended both Greek and later the American school in Bitola. She completed her studies in 1911 in Constantinople, receiving personal assistance from Naim Frasheri. She actively participated in the Congress of the alphabet (1908) and the Congress in Elbasan (1909). She served as a member of the Commission tasked with reviewing school textbooks. She is credited as

the author of three textbooks: “*The Grammar of Albanian Language*”, “*Primer*”, and “*History*”.

Parashqevi Qiriazhi (1880), was among the first generation of students at the girls' school offering instruction in Albanian language in Korca. She finished her pedagogical studies in 1904 in Constantinople. Upon graduation, she took over the management of the girls' school in Korca. Alongside her sister, Sevasti, she participated in the Congress of the Albanian Alphabet. In 1909, she authored the textbook “*Primer for first schools*” (with instructions in Albanian), thereby establishing herself as one of the pioneering Albanian authors and notably, the first female author of a textbook (Dervishi (2018): 178).

Conclusion

The collective efforts of Albanian activists and intellectuals are directed towards expressing and affirmation of the national culture and education in the native language.

Among the Albanian intellectuals from Macedonia whose activities significantly impacted the development of the pedagogical thought during the period 1895–1912 are: Rexhep Voka, Josif Bageri, and Hamdi Ohri. Throughout their lives, through their creative endeavors both domestically and internationally, they advocated for the national, linguistic, and cultural unity of Albanians within the Ottoman Empire.

Rexhep Voka successfully adapted the Arabic alphabet for the Albanian language. Despite being in favor of the Arabic alphabet, he never opposed the teaching in the mother tongue. The Qiriazhi family from Bitola committed their entire moral, material, and spiritual potential to the national cause, particularly emphasizing educational and cultural aspects.

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