

# WHY DID THE ARBER & EPIROTS RETURN IN ALBANIANS

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## Abstract

To unravel the complex history of the Albanians, the so-called Pandora's Box has already been opened so as not to be closed until the truth is revealed. From the invasion of Albania by the Turkish empire in 1478 and until about 1660-1703, in addition to the military and political occupation, began to outline some new strata in the then population, strata of population that spoke Albanian or Albanian-speaking, because they were colonists who came from areas of the Turkish Empire, but Muslim, native converted to Islam with military-political positions and after them were converted en masse and peasants, but remained orthodox most of the Orthodox religion, either in the north of the Albanian lands or in the middle lands, and whether in the south. Thus, under Turkish pressure, which implemented the special anti-Arbëresh-Epirote strategy, at the end of the 17th century - beginning of the 18th century, there was a tragic spiritual and religious division of the Albanian-speaking population with all the consequences that are still felt today. due to religious and traditional dichotomy. So, the problem of the unification of the Albanian lands and in general of the Albanian people is not so easy, but in the first place it requires some preconditions and clarification of the truth, no matter how difficult or easy it may seem. This fact can also be explained with the phrase of Faik Konica that he showed; "When I started the fight for the liberation of Albania twenty-five years ago, I remembered as a very young man that the problem was only a problem of nationality, that is, that if he managed to fully awaken the sense of nationality in the hearts of Albanians, the establishment of a free Albania, it was a finished job as soon as the opportunity arose. When I thought more, for fifteen years now, I realized that the problem of Albania rather than national was a moral problem .. In other words this people in order to be saved, he needs, first of all, to be trained and to elevate his character, to soften and purify his heart..` Many, especially those of the type Koço Danaj, or the Albanian AK, or Kosovar self-determination, radicals seeking with pathos and rage the return of the past of `Jasha Padishah`, seek the unification of Albanian lands as if it were just a broken piece of crystal that can be easily glued.

**Keywords:** Epirotes, Arber, schisma, shkie, skiptar

## Abstrakti

Për të zbardhur historinë e ndërlkuar të shqiptarëve, e ashtuquajtur Kutia e Pandorës është hapur tashmë për të mos u mbyllur më derisa të zbulohet e vërteta. Që nga pushtimi i Shqipërisë nga perandoria turke më 1478 dhe deri rreth viteve 1660-1703, përveç pushtimit ushtarak dhe politik, filloi të rrvijëzohen disa shtresa të reja në popullatën e atëhershme, shtresa popullate që flisnin shqip ose shqipfolës, sepse ishin kolonë të ardhur nga viset e perandorisë turke, por myslimanë, vendas të konvertuar në islamë me pozita ushtarako-politike dhe pas tyre u konvertuan në masë dhe bujkrobërit, por mbetën dhe vendas shumica me fe ortodokse, qoftë në veri të trojeve shqiptare qoftë në trojet e mesme, e qoftë në jug. Kështu, nën presionin turk, i cili zbatoi strategjinë e posaçme anti-arbëresho-epirote, në fund të shek XVII- fillim shek të XVIII, ndodhi dhe ndarja tragjike shpirtërore e fetare e popullsisë që fliste shqip me të gjitha pasojat që ndihen e dhe sot për shkak të dyzimit fetar dhe tradicional. Pra, problem i bashkimit të trojeve shqiptare dhe në përgjithësi i popullit shqiptar nuk është aq i lehtë, por në radhë të parë kërkon disa parakushte dhe zbardhje e së vërtetës sado e rëndë apo e lehtë të duket.

Ky fakt mund të shpjegohet edhe me frazën e Faik Konicës që tregonte; "Kur nisa luftën për çlirimin e Shqipërisë njëzet e pesë vjet më parë, kujtoja si shumë i ri që isha se problem ish vetëm një problem kombësie, d.m.th., se po të arrinte të zgjohej plotësisht ndjenja e kombësisë në zemër të shqiptarëve, themelimi i një Shqipërie të lirë, ish një punë e mbaruar posa të vinte rasti. Kur mu poq mendja më tepër, që pesëmbëdhjetë vjet e tëhu, kuptova se problem i Shqipërisë më tepër se kombëtar ish një problem moral.. Në fjalë të tjera ky popull që të shpëtojë, ka nevojë më parë se çdo gjë tjetër, t'i stërvitet e t'i lartësohet karakteri, t'i zbutet e t'i spastrohet zemra..` Shumëkush sidomos ata të tipit Koço Danaj, apo të AK shqiptare, ose të Vetvendosja kosovare, radikalistë që kërkojnë me pathos e mlllef kthimin e të kaluarës të `Jasha Padishah`, e kërkojnë bashkimin e trojeve shqiptare sikur ajo të ishte thjesht një copë kristali e thyer që mund të ngjitet lehtësisht.

**Fjalet kyç:** Epirotes, Arber, schisma, shkie, skiptar.

## Introduction

After the Ottoman conquest (1389–1703), the Arbërians and Epirotes were partially assimilated, and a new mixed population emerged, called Albanian, but which continued to speak the ancient Arbërian-Epirote language that later became known as Albanian.

The death of the National Hero Gjergj Kastrioti – Skanderbeg – and the conquest of Albania and Epirus from 1479 until 1912 caused extraordinary changes in the population of that time, including changes in the ethnic structure, religion, and the social and political system.

The issue of religion, especially during the Ottoman invasion and occupation, was of primary importance for the Arbërian & Epirote population and the Albanians, because it created major problems. Some of the Arbërian & Epirote communities converted, disappeared, or were Islamized. What has not been written is that a part of this population did not leave but was transformed into Slavic Orthodox Serb or Macedonian populations, or even Arvanite groups, who face the risk of complete Hellenization, while another part fled to the mountains to escape Ottoman cruelty, later descending to the few partially depopulated cities and lowland areas, which were partly repopulated by Ottoman settlers.

Arbëria and Epirus were emptied, leaving only the highlanders of the north and south as well as the Ottoman peasant population brought between the 1500s and 1700s.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and after Skanderbeg's death in 1468, the urban population and the wealthy and middle classes fled to Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria, reaching as far as Ukraine. Those who went to Venice and Ragusa were Catholic Arbërians, but today even they no longer speak Albanian.

Those who went to Calabria and Naples — the Arbëresh — were Orthodox but under the jurisdiction of the Vatican and were called UNITES; to this day they still speak Albanian. Similarly, the Orthodox Arbërians & Epirotes who fled east to Rumelia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Moldova were called Arnauts or Albanians.

The Northern Arbërians, to protect their properties and faith, aligned themselves with the Serbian Church, which had certain privileges granted by the Ottoman Empire and thus saved themselves from Ottoman reprisals, but they forgot their language; they were certainly called “Shkie” by Serbs and Albanian-speaking Muslims — a term derived from the Latin word “schisma.”

The Eastern Arbërians & Epirotes also aligned with the Bulgarian Church to escape Ottoman retaliation and to preserve their properties and religion, but they forgot their language and were called Macedonians rather than Bulgarians, despite the church preaching in Bulgarian.

The Northwestern Arbërians, who were Orthodox and lived in the Principality of the Balshas, also aligned with the Serbian Church and were called Montenegrins, perhaps due to confusion between the word “Malëci” and the Serbian pronunciation of “Montenegro” (Mali i Zi).

The Arbërians & Epirotes who joined the Ottoman army and administration and adapted to Ottoman language and life were called Arnauts both in Turkey and in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon; after several centuries, they forgot everything, assimilated, and became citizens of those countries.

In Albania and Kosovo, the remaining Arbërian & Epirotes who sheltered in the mountains, along with newcomers who later descended into cities and settled or founded villages, converted to Islam in order to escape high taxes that non-Muslims had to pay.

After 1703, specifically after the Arbër' Assembly on January 14-15, 1703, at the Church of St. John the Baptist in the village of Mërqi near Lezha, alongside Catholic Arbërians, the word “Shqiptar” (Albanian) was mentioned for the first time to describe the Muslim population that spoke Albanian. Until the formation of the Albanian state on November 28, 1912, and afterwards, the population speaking the ancient language was called Albanian and the country was called Albania, including Kosovo and other Albanian-populated territories in Montenegro, Macedonia, and Greece that spoke the ancient Albanian language.

This is the history of present-day Albania, which holds many secrets, distortions, losses, and hidden documents. But one thing survived even today in this new population — the spoken Albanian language, written with various alphabets over millennia according to invasions and influences from Latin, Greek, and possibly the earliest Phoenician scripts, with which the words of gods, tribes, and toponyms were written, many of which still retain clear meaning in Albanian. Yet historians and linguists classified it as a Greek language and Greek script.

## Analysis

This phenomenon can never happen through the artificial rise of nationalism, or through sharia that reminds of Kahrar-name of the League of Prizren which ultimately led to the division of Albanian lands between the neighbors<sup>1</sup>. It should not be forgotten that after 1878, non-Muslim Albanians, i.e. Christians who had found shelter and support in the respective Slavic churches, such as the Orthodox Albanians of the northern Albanian territories or the Skies, and the Orthodox Albanians of the south or Arvanitis. Reason? The reason according to them was that Arbëria and Epirus cannot become a separate state, because they are occupied by the Turks and that Albanians of the Islamic religion are not Albanians! Here, the respective churches, the long time under occupation, the golden opportunity gained after the defeat of Turkey in 1878 by the Russians have influenced.

But why did this strong division happen between the Albanians and the two main religions, because both communities were ruled by the Ottoman Turks? His story is painful and if the truth should be revealed, it should not condition us for the future of the Albanian population and the Albanian lands, but simply to find the best possible solution in this new Balkan and European reality, of course through integration. With three lines (which actually require hundreds of pages of explanation), the main problems in the Albanian lands and the Albanian population which have caused the division of not only the Albanian lands but also an impact on the Albanian population, both Muslim and Christian, are as follows:

- The Turkish invasion damaged the formation of a genuine Albanian state which, if history had been different, would not have been called Albania but Arbëri and Epirus, because in the first place it damaged the binomial Religion + Homeland = State, harming religion. Some may say that.. but before the Turkish invasion? The chances were to form a strong Arber state that would dominate the Balkans.
- The reasons why the Turkish rule had more serious consequences in the Albanian lands than in other Balkan lands are: The stubbornness of the Albanian leaders (Arbërias and Epirotes) not to submit, Human and economic resources less than the Turkish Empire, little European aid.
- The reasons why the Turks totally destroyed the arboretum principalities, territories, castles, and expelled the people were: the harsh and armed obstacle that made the Albanians against the spread of Islam, the refusal to accept vassalage for a long time, the Western incitement,
- The reasons why the Turks took many Albanians of that time and put them in executive and military positions, was that the Arber and Epirote race, an ancient, beautiful, brave and intelligent race, actually constituted the Turkish strategy; conquer and fight with Janissary commanders and soldiers (not Turks, but converted hostages),
- The argument why the Albanian population was not completely assimilated despite all the pressure and violence was: the survival of the population through emigration (so as not to surrender and convert - the rich and the middle left), + through conversion to Islam (for favors and power , and thus also a survival with negative effects), +through the preservation of religion by seeking support from the Orthodox Churches that had the permission of Turkey but that caused the loss of the language, or from the Catholic Church which also had the same effect on the population that sought refuge and support).

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<sup>1</sup> Pirro Prifti: *The League of Prizren and the Islamic League*, 2014, Albanian Heart

- The Turkish strategy of Islamization for the lands and the Albanian population that did not emigrate can be presented through six tactics: murder for those who do not return, hostages for those who waver, heavy taxes for the non-Islamic community, demolition of castles, removal of inhabitants and the construction of villages and cities in places without protection, and influx of other population to <sup>2</sup> populate the fields and hills of the abandoned Albanian lands, mainly from Anatolia, Persia, Abkhazia, giving rewards and military-administrative posts to converts.

The Turkish-Ottoman revenge fell very heavily on the Albanians and their lands precisely to take revenge on the stubborn Christian Albanians because Sultan Mehmet II himself (the one who conquered Constantinople in 1453) said about the Albanians (the Arbër-Epirotes at that time): "I will not let stone on stone in Arbëri". And so he did, he destroyed all the forts. He even destroyed and damaged the tomb of Gjergj Kastrioti-Skanderbeg, taking his bones - "for a talisman" (M.Barletti `George Castrioti-Skanderbeg, Prince of Epirus)<sup>3</sup>

In my article from a few days ago "Shkijet and Albanians - or the Genesis of the word Albanian and Albania", the problem of where the Orthodox Albanians disappeared (and less so the Catholic ones) was a problem that was both "taboo" and a little mysterious, because in fact it also had to do with the transition to a new stage of the spoken Albanian language and of course the change of names and denominations due to the religious divide and the breakdown of the Albanian state for almost 500 years. The Albanians on the border with the Slavs did not emigrate but chose another alternative not mentioned before by our historians: they approached the Slavic Orthodox Church because it had immunity; this saved them from reprisals. And this is where the transformation begins. From Arbër to Albanian. The Orthodox Arbers protected by the Slavic Church - called the converted Muslim Arbers as Sqep-tars, while the Orthodox Arbers called them Shqije-Sqja-nga schizma (which means skep, so,). The word Albanian was left to the Arbers and Epirotes who converted to Muslims; the Orthodox Arbers, who joined the Slavs out of trouble, were called Schikies; the orthodox epirotes were called arvanitas; Orthodox who spoke Albanian in the Albanian lands were called cristians albanians as -Kaurr. According to F. Xharra: "The year 1637, for Gjakova, according to the missionary fra Bonaventura da Palacula, of the 500 houses of this village, only 20 were Catholic, the others "il resto tutti Turche et Scismatici" (the rest were Muslim Albanians and Albanians of the Scythians). And then continues: "Per andare dalla parte del Settentrione sopra Jacova incominciano li Scismatici" - going up from Gjakova to Deçan, north of Gjakova through the villages of all the "schismatic" villagers In March 1683 the testimonies of brother Kerubini give the demographic-statistical picture of the district of Gjakova as "from Gjakova to Deçan were all schismatics and the Monastery of Deçan. So friar Kerubini from Gjakova to Deçan came across "schismatic villages" ("molte ville di Scismatici").

An example of the presence of Orthodox Albanians is also this, where it is written (1837) about Hasi (among the mountains of Pashtriku, in the Drin River valley, south of Gjakova): the entire region is inhabited by Albanianized Serbs and Albanians. ..(tout le district habite par des Serbes allbanises et des Albanaïs)". For the castles of Peja and Gjakova, until the Crimean War, according to Myller and Bue, it was established that the Orthodox Christian element prevailed in the surroundings of these cities (shkijet p.xh.) and less Catholic Albanians, Latin (<http://www.revistadrini.com/2012/03/fahri-xharra-kush-jane-shkijet-1/>)<sup>4</sup>. The spiritual division in addition to those of the lands in the Sanjak occurred under Ottoman pressure, which on the one hand did everything to keep the Balkans occupied, where the most rebellious population was that of the Arbërs and Epirots. This spiritual-religious division happened when a large community of Islamized Arbërs was created who, together with groups coming from Anatolia, were spread together with mostly Orthodox Christian Albanians, but also Catholic ones in the north, in the center, and south of the Albanian lands. Most of them were

<sup>2</sup> Marin Barleti: *The history of Skanderbeg Prince of the Epirotes*, year 2005, reprint, p.200-344,

<sup>3</sup> Marin Barleti: *The history of Skanderbeg Prince of the Epirotes*, year 2005, reprint, p.200-344,

<sup>4</sup> Fahri Xharra: *The historical truth - Orthodox Albanians of Macedonia*, 2013, ISBN 978-9951-641-59-3 [1]

privileged and ran the administration and the army, but spoke the Arabic language. The Christian population in the north of the country, as well as in the south, influenced, subjugated, mistreated by the conqueror, became hostile to the Islamized population as much as feeling unprotected, or left altogether to Italy in the north of Venice or in the South in Calabria.

The other sought refuge and consolation in the Church Slavonic and Greek because of the reprisals, surviving but sacrificing the language over time due also to the pressure of the hosts (after 1878).

The division started from enmity due to the loss of land, the risk of losing religion. They were called by the Islamized Arbri (Rabans) as Shqie or Shqa who betrayed the land and language, while the Shqie or Shqata called the Islamized Arbri as Shqeptare (who have left the religion).

This is how the Albanians who spoke Albanian but who were of Islamic faith were created after 1703, and they were called that in all the lands and the language from Arbrian to Albanian, in the south, the Christian Arbers were called Arvanitas as well as their Arberish brothers in Italy ; whereas it happened that the Orthodox Christian Albanians who came down over the years after 1878 were called Albanians just like their Muslim brothers.

Despite official orders that Muslim Albanians be called Turks both at home and abroad, in fact as a result of violence and pressure, Orthodox Christian Albanians in the south were called Greeks, and Orthodox Albanians in the north who joined the Church Slavonic were called Shqa, Shkie . Thus, the spoken Albanian language continued to survive from ancient times to the present day, but in groups and populations of people with different religions, the clash between which was instigated by the Turkish conqueror, - in fact, it destroyed the culture of this ancient people. The war for freedom brought to light on November 28, 1912 a truncated state and full of problems with itself, so Albania looked like a patient who lived in a psychiatric hospital, who came out into a new reality without being able to orientate and without understand who he is.

### III

What can we do for the population of Orthodox Albanian origin that also lives in its own lands but under other neighboring states? The population of Albanian origin or the northern fringes who live as Serbs, as Montenegrins, and as Macedonians under the new conditions of democracy, integration and globalization, have the opportunity to decide for themselves where they should live, but at least not get involved in radicalism Slavic orthodox, but try to re-find their roots <sup>5,6</sup>. The same can be said about the Arvanites. Due to the conditions, they made their choice 280 years ago, but nevertheless, they have preserved the language, even partially. Orthodox Albanians in Macedonia (said to be 300,000) but also in Serbia (?) should be emancipated. To be emancipated - they must be supported. In addition to religious tolerance or as it can be better called ``religious indifference" according to A. Klosi<sup>7</sup> which only temporarily solves the survival between communities, communist atheism created the illusion of coexistence (bratsvo-jedinstvo), but now atheism is a serious danger for Albanians in the not-so-distant future, because atheism causes moral degeneration and consumerism, which for a small country like us, as well as western globalism, will severely damage our identity. Of course, the state of post-communism is also harmful, along with its negative aspects; unemployment, poverty, radicalism, nationalism. Today, the silent spiritual division, the political wars, the different strategies to progress, I think come from traditional religious differences and preferences.

I think religion is the problem that hinders the spiritual and real unity of Albanians: Each community wants its own history, its own heroes. Let this clash happen, which is why we are inferior to our neighbors because we fight among ourselves and insult our own or each other's heroes. Support should come from Muslim Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia, as well as from the Albanian state along with the Kosovar one, and thirdly, support should also come from abroad.

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<sup>5</sup> Kristo Frasheri: *Lidhja shqiptare e Prizrenit : 1878-1881 : botohet me rastin e 100-vjetorit të lidhjes shqiptare të Prizrenit - (1979)*

<sup>6</sup> Kristo Frasheri: *E vërteta mbi Shqiptarët e Maqedonisë dhe shtrembërimet e Enciklopedisë së Shkupit - (2010)*

<sup>7</sup> Klosi, Ardian: Archived 3 March 2016 at the Wayback Machine, *uebersetzercolloquium.de* (in German)

Obstacles: Religious prejudices among Albanians have so far nullified their mutual understanding and support because it is precisely this problem that has divided them and created the terms "Shkie" and "Shqiptare." This has been a dividing bridge; Muslim Albanians were called "Shkiet" by the Albanian Shkije (Shkije—schism or “shkep,” to split). Thus, the religious problem was the main one that weakened and fragmented Albania. Another possible origin of the word "Shqiptar" (Albanian) could come from the name of the city Skopje, where the Islamized Arbërians of Skopje were called "Shkuptare," "Shkiptare," or "Shqiptare."

So the religious problem was the main one that weakened and divided Albania. The next question arises, why the Orthodox Albanians, just like the Arvanites, found it easier to preserve their religion by joining the Slavic and Greek churches, than to cooperate with the Muslim Albanians or, in the opposite case, to emigrate? Do you want the truth? There is only one answer: Muslim Albanians, as the most privileged in the Ottoman Empire in these lands, behaved very badly with the Scythians and the Arvanites. So they found it impossible to cooperate. That was the separation. We praise (Albania and Kosovo) two things: the League of Prizren and Ali Pasha Tepelena. Both, despite the official interpretations - the League of Prizren with Kahrarname - sanctioned the Turkish invasion because it did not envisage either an Albanian capital, an Albanian state, or an Albanian language. Then? Why is there a League of Albanians? The connection of Albanians and pro-Turkish beyliers? This was also the reason why no one supported us; Secondly, Ali Pasha Tepelena: Is this man a hero or a criminal who destroyed all of Tuscany and Epirus, making the final division of the Albanian Christians (who in the south were called either “Greeks” or Arvanitas) with the Albanian Muslims. This caused the Arvanites to join the Greeks (Romanoi), and with the help of the Anglo-Russians they liberated the tree and non-tree lands to the south, but ultimately agreed to live under a Greek-speaking state.

The same thing happened with the Slavs: With the Slavs of the North and the South, they accepted the Arbers (that is, as we call the Orthodox Arbers today because of the schism or 'break' with their Muslim brothers), to enter their umbrella to protect but also to benefit from them. For Kosovo and Macedonia, it will take time, I think for a secular state in Kosovo, because the population is not well educated and is full of religious prejudices. This phase must be passed, which is being extended by the exaggeration of the religious cult (by powerful individuals) to the extreme, doing the opposite of what the West wants. For this reason, a new integration strategy is needed in accordance with the orders of the EU and the USA, in which today's Albanian factors and actors must cooperate in the first place;

- Integrate into the EU sooner or later, and simultaneously:
- The re-renewal of a single Academy for all Albanian lands for Albanian History and Language,
- Close contacts, and the creation of conditions for acquaintance, rapprochement, and cooperation with the Albanians integrated with the Slavs and their church (Scythes), the Albanians of Greece (Arvanitas), contacts and rapprochement and cooperation with the Albanians of Turkey and wherever they are , in order to know their true history.
- Removing the pressure of religious prejudices on the population, which will be done through compulsory education, Basic religious education should not be done until the end of adolescence, that is, it should be done in high school or high school<sup>89</sup>
- Create comprehensive conditions to count everything irregular: education and compulsory education up to high school, counting the administration, preserving and strengthening the official language by enriching it with agreement with new dialectal things,

Unfortunately, this is the truth, that they are sorry or even ashamed to be called Albanians, but they prefer to be called Shkie (or `shkja`) or Serbs or Greeks, considering the bitter past when the Ottoman Turks and the Arbers converted to Islam. they took advantage of the opportunity

<sup>8</sup> Kristo Frasheri: *The truth about Macedonian Albanians and the distortions of the Skopje Encyclopedia* - (2010)

<sup>9</sup> Faik Konica: *"Faik Konitza – Selected Correspondence 1896–1942"*

to become owners, administrators, commanders under that regime, oppressing both Arbers converted to Islam but poor as well as Arber Christians and Epiros, taking away their lands. The Albanian name was partially identified with Arbers and the Islamized Epirots<sup>10 11</sup>.

However, the word ship remained a word used by all the actors. The situation changed after 1878, and the enmity became even worse because these same Albanian speakers created the Greek state, the Serbian state, and after the 20th century, a truncated Albania was created, and in the 21st century, Kosovo was created.

Today is the time to recognize themselves with the help of integration. This is a difficult path, but it will take us where we need to be: the prosperity of the Albanian lands, integration and close cooperation with the progressive forces, the respect of our neighbors towards us.

## Conclusion

From the materials studied, I believe that the true history of Albania is missing some important parts, which could cause debates and further clarifications. These discussions might also resonate with neighboring countries, who for political reasons—and because part of their history overlaps with Albanian history—may react mostly negatively through political lobbies. Meanwhile, academic circles will likely call for further research.

It is known that the gaps in Albanian history have been caused by three main reasons:

First, the lack of willingness by Albanian historians themselves, and perhaps some foreign Albanologists, to tell the truth—mainly due to religious divisions, despite religious tolerance. Second, the political pressure from neighboring countries, whose constructed histories would be damaged by the emergence of the truth that contradicts their politically motivated narratives. Third, some academics, both Albanian and foreign, have distorted the truths due to pressure or being paid to write the opposite.

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<sup>10</sup> KristoFrasheri: *The truth about Macedonian Albanians and the distortions of the Skopje Encyclopedia* - (2010)

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