THE CONCEPTS OF NATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF ARBËN XHAFERI

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Abstract

This paper examined the concepts of nation and national identity in the political thought of Arbën Xhaferi, with particular attention to the historical and political circumstances of Albanians in the Western Balkans. The study analysed Xhaferi's understanding of the relationship between nation, state, language, history, culture, geography, and religious tolerance, while focusing on his distinction between nation-building and state-building. The analysis showed that, in Xhaferi's thought, national identity could not be reduced to citizenship or state borders, but was understood through a combination of historical, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and territorial elements. Particular attention was given to his interpretation of Albanian national identity through the elements of blood, language, and geography, which he further complemented with common history, continuity of tradition, and identification with that tradition. The paper also examined Xhaferi's position on the role of the standardized Albanian language as an instrument of national cohesion and his understanding of religious tolerance as an important component of Albanian identity. Methodologically, the study employed qualitative analysis of Xhaferi's political writings, published works, and public statements, combined with a critical reading of relevant theoretical approaches to nationalism and collective identity. The analysis indicated that Xhaferi's conception of national identity was primarily grounded in historical continuity and cultural cohesion, while recognizing the complex relationship between national identity, political institutions, and statehood in the contemporary Western Balkans.

Keywords: Arbën Xhaferi; national identity; nationalism; nation-building; state-building; Albanian identity.

1. Introduction

The concept of national identity has remained one of the central subjects in the study of nationalism, particularly in societies characterized by historical fragmentation, multiethnicity and competing political interpretations of belonging. The relationship between nation and state has also represented a significant theoretical and political question in the Western Balkans, where the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the emergence of new states and the redefinition of political identities have created complex forms of interaction between citizenship, ethnicity, language, territory and collective memory.

Within this context, the political thought of Arbën Xhaferi represents an important subject for analysis. Xhaferi was not only a political actor but also a public intellectual whose writings and political interventions addressed questions concerning the Albanian nation, national identity, language, statehood, political representation and relations between Albanians living in different political and territorial contexts. His reflections were particularly significant because they developed during a period of profound political transformation in the Balkans, including the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the emergence of independent states, the Kosovo question and the transformation of the political order in North Macedonia.

This paper analyzed the conceptual relationship between nation and national identity in Xhaferi's political thought. It focused particularly on five interconnected dimensions: language, historical continuity, cultural tradition, geography and religious tolerance. It also examined his distinction between nation-building and state-building and his understanding of national identity as a phenomenon that cannot be fully confined to the political boundaries of an individual state.

The central research question was: How does Arbën Xhaferi conceptualize the relationship between nation, national identity and statehood, and which elements does he consider fundamental to Albanian national identity?

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The study proceeded from the argument that Xhaferi's conception of national identity was predominantly historical-cultural and ethno-cultural rather than exclusively civic or state-centred. At the same time, the paper did not treat this conception as an unquestionable description of Albanian identity. Rather, it examined it as a particular political-intellectual construction and assessed its strengths and limitations in relation to contemporary theories of nationalism.

Methodologically, the study used qualitative analysis of Xhaferi's published writings, essays, interviews and political statements, particularly the materials collected in Kombi; Identiteti; Shteti. The analysis was complemented by theoretical perspectives developed in the literature on nationalism and national identity, particularly those associated with Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, E. J. Hobsbawm and Anthony D. Smith.

The study therefore sought not merely to reproduce Xhaferi's positions but to place them within the broader theoretical debate concerning the relationship between nation, identity and state..

2. Theoretical Approaches to Nation and National Identity

2.1. The Concept of Nation

The concept of nation does not have a single universally accepted definition. Modern scholarship has approached the nation from historical, political, sociological, cultural and constructivist perspectives.

Benedict Anderson conceptualizes the nation as an "imagined community", emphasizing the role of shared perceptions of belonging and the possibility of imagining community beyond direct interpersonal relations (Anderson, 2006). The term "imagined" does not imply that nations are unreal; rather, it emphasizes that members of a nation generally do not personally know most of the other members with whom they nevertheless share a sense of collective belonging.

Ernest Gellner approaches nationalism through the relationship between culture and political organization. His analysis emphasizes the role of modernization, literacy, education and standardized culture in the formation and reproduction of national communities (Gellner, 1983). From this perspective, language and cultural standardization are not merely symbolic phenomena but can also become institutional mechanisms of social integration.

E. J. Hobsbawm places greater emphasis on the historical construction of nations and nationalism. His approach draws attention to the modern political character of national identities and to the role of historical narratives, traditions and political institutions in producing collective identification (Hobsbawm, 1990).

Anthony D. Smith, while recognizing the modern dimensions of nationalism, gives greater attention to ethnic memories, symbols, myths, traditions and historical experiences. National identity, in this perspective, can be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving territory, shared memories, cultural elements and collective identification (Smith, 1991).

These approaches demonstrate that national identity cannot be reduced to a single variable. Language, territory, historical memory, political institutions and cultural symbols may interact differently in different historical contexts.

2.2. Ethnic and Civic Dimensions of National Identity

One of the classical distinctions in the study of nationalism concerns ethnic and civic understandings of national identity. In simplified form, the civic conception places greater emphasis on citizenship, political institutions and common political values, whereas the ethno-

cultural conception places greater emphasis on ancestry, language, culture, historical memory and traditions.
However, this distinction should not be treated as an absolute binary. In practice, most national identities contain both civic and cultural elements. Modern states may define citizenship in civic terms while simultaneously maintaining strong cultural narratives about language, history and collective memory.
This distinction is particularly relevant for the analysis of Xhaferi because he frequently emphasizes historical continuity, language, cultural tradition and common belonging. His approach therefore corresponds more closely to an ethno-cultural understanding of national identity. Nevertheless, his political thought also contains a significant concern with political institutions, state organization, equality and the relationship between communities.
The analytical value of this distinction lies precisely in identifying the tension between cultural belonging and political citizenship rather than assuming that one necessarily excludes the other.

2.3. Nation, State and National Identity

Nation and state are analytically distinct concepts. A state possesses political and legal institutions, territorial jurisdiction and sovereignty, whereas a nation refers to a community of collective identification that may or may not coincide with a state.
National identity therefore does not necessarily disappear when a population lives within different states. Conversely, citizenship of the same state does not necessarily produce a single homogeneous national identity.
This distinction is particularly relevant in the Western Balkans, where historical borders and political transformations have divided national communities among several states. In such circumstances, the relationship between political citizenship and national identity becomes especially complex.
Xhaferi's thought can be interpreted within this framework. His emphasis on the distinction between nation-building and state-building indicates that he does not regard the two processes as identical. State institutions can be established within a particular territory, while national identity may continue to develop through language, history, culture and collective memory beyond that territory.

3. Nation and State in Xhaferi's Political Thought

3.1. Nation-Building and State-Building

A central feature of Xhaferi's political thought is the distinction between nation-building and state-building. In his reflections, these processes are interconnected but cannot simply be equated.
State-building concerns the construction and consolidation of political institutions, legal structures and mechanisms of governance. Nation-building, by contrast, concerns the development and reproduction of collective political and cultural belonging.
This distinction becomes particularly important in relation to Kosovo and the post-Yugoslav political order. Xhaferi expresses concern that the development of state institutions should not automatically be interpreted as the creation of a completely separate national identity. In his framework, the political construction of a state and the cultural-historical identity of a population represent different analytical levels.
The distinction does not imply that statehood is irrelevant to national identity. On the contrary, modern states often contribute substantially to the institutionalization of language, education,

symbols and historical narratives. Nevertheless, Xhaferi's approach suggests that national identity may precede, transcend or extend beyond a particular state structure.
This position is particularly important for understanding his broader conception of Albanian identity in the Balkans.

3.2. Nation, People, Ethnicity and State

Xhaferi distinguishes, explicitly or implicitly, between several concepts that are often treated as synonymous in political discourse: people, ethnicity, nation and state.
For him, the nation is not simply an administrative category. It is associated with historical continuity, cultural memory, language, territory and collective identification. The state, on the other hand, represents the political and institutional framework within which authority is organized.
This distinction allows Xhaferi to conceptualize Albanian national identity as extending beyond the borders of Albania or any single state. Albanians living in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, the Preševo Valley and elsewhere may possess different political and civic experiences while maintaining a broader sense of national belonging.
From a theoretical perspective, this position is consistent with the idea that national communities and states do not always coincide. Anderson's concept of imagined communities is useful here because it demonstrates how national belonging can be sustained across territorial distances through shared narratives, symbols, language and collective memory (Anderson, 2006).
At the same time, Xhaferi's approach differs from strongly civic conceptions of nationhood because it assigns considerable importance to historical-cultural continuity.

3.3. National Identity Beyond State Borders

One of the most important elements of Xhaferi's thought is the idea that national identity cannot be determined exclusively by state borders.
For Xhaferi, the division of Albanians among several states is a historical and political reality, but it does not necessarily eliminate their broader national identity. Language, cultural memory, historical narratives and traditions can preserve a sense of common belonging despite political separation.
This argument also explains Xhaferi's concern with attempts to interpret political and territorial differentiation as the automatic emergence of entirely separate national identities.
From an analytical perspective, this position should not be understood as a denial of different civic identities. An individual may simultaneously possess a local, civic, regional and national identity. Rather, Xhaferi places the national dimension at the center of this plurality.
His approach therefore provides an interesting case for examining the relationship between multiple identities. It emphasizes continuity of national belonging while leaving open the question of how such belonging interacts with citizenship and political loyalty to individual states.

4. Elements of Albanian National Identity According to Xhaferi

4.1. Language

Language occupies a central position in Xhaferi's conception of national identity. He considers the Albanian language one of the principal mechanisms through which collective belonging is maintained.

His emphasis on the standardized Albanian language is connected with the broader question of national cohesion. A common linguistic standard can facilitate communication across regional and territorial divisions and can strengthen educational, cultural and institutional integration.
This argument also corresponds, in part, with Gellner's emphasis on standardized language and education in modern national societies (Gellner, 1983).
However, Xhaferi's argument is not merely functional. Language also has symbolic significance. It serves as a marker of historical continuity and collective belonging.
His criticism of inadequate use of standard Albanian should therefore be understood within a broader concern that linguistic fragmentation may reinforce regional divisions within the Albanian-speaking community.
At the same time, a scientific analysis should avoid treating linguistic standardization as sufficient by itself to produce national cohesion. Language interacts with institutions, education, media, historical memory and social structures.

4.2. Historical Continuity and Tradition

Historical continuity represents another central component of Xhaferi's conception of identity. In his discussion of Albanian national identity, Xhaferi emphasizes not only the existence of a shared historical experience but also the cultivation and transmission of tradition. He considers continuity, the cultivation of traditional values and identification with that tradition important elements in preserving collective identity.
This approach corresponds with the broader literature that recognizes collective memory and historical narratives as important components of national identity (Smith, 1991).
However, historical continuity is not necessarily a neutral description of the past. National communities construct narratives through which particular historical experiences acquire meaning. Hobsbawm's work is particularly useful for recognizing that traditions may be selected, reconstructed and institutionalized in specific historical circumstances (Hobsbawm, 1990).
Consequently, Xhaferi's interpretation of Albanian historical continuity should be analyzed as part of a national narrative rather than treated automatically as an uncontested historiographical conclusion.

4.3. Geography and Collective Belonging

Xhaferi also attaches considerable importance to geography. In his formulation, geography represents one of the elements included in the "3GJ" formula: **gjaku, gjuha dhe gjeografia**—blood, language and geography.
Importantly, Xhaferi does not leave this formula at the level of biological or territorial belonging. He complements it with common history, continuity of tradition and identification with that tradition.
The "3GJ" formula should therefore be understood primarily as a conceptual framework used by Xhaferi rather than as a universally accepted scientific definition of national identity.
Its importance lies in the way it combines ancestry, language and territory with historical-cultural memory.
This combination corresponds to a more ethno-cultural conception of nationhood and differs from theories that define national identity primarily through citizenship and political institutions.

4.4. Religious Tolerance

Religious tolerance constitutes a particularly significant dimension of Xhaferi's understanding of Albanian identity.

In his analysis, religious differences among Albanians do not necessarily undermine national unity. On the contrary, he considers the ability to maintain common national belonging across religious divisions to be an important characteristic of Albanian historical experience.

Xhaferi explicitly emphasizes tolerance rather than religious uniformity as a component of Albanian identity. In *Shteti dhe identiteti*, he presents religious tolerance as a determining factor of Albanian national identity (Xhaferi, 2017, pp. 291–292).

This argument is analytically significant because it demonstrates that Xhaferi's conception of identity is not based solely on ethnicity or language. It also includes an attempt to explain how religious pluralism can coexist with national cohesion.

Nevertheless, the claim that religious tolerance constitutes an inherent or permanent characteristic of an entire nation should be treated cautiously. From a contemporary social-scientific perspective, national identities are historically constructed and internally diverse. Xhaferi's formulation is therefore better understood as a normative and historical interpretation of Albanian identity.

5. Xhaferi's Conception of Albanian Identity in the Contemporary Balkans

Xhaferi's conception of Albanian identity developed within a region characterized by state transformation, territorial division and competing national projects.

The political dissolution of Yugoslavia changed the institutional environment in which Albanians lived. The emergence of independent states created new citizenship frameworks, while national identities continued to operate across state borders.

Xhaferi's thought reflects this tension. On the one hand, he recognized the importance of political institutions and state-building. On the other hand, he rejected the assumption that the establishment of separate state frameworks necessarily required the creation of completely separate national identities.

This perspective becomes particularly relevant in relation to Kosovo. Xhaferi viewed state-building as a necessary political process but remained attentive to the possibility that political institutionalization could be accompanied by new forms of identity fragmentation.

His approach therefore places the Albanian question at the intersection of three dimensions:

1. **national identity and historical continuity;**
2. **statehood and political citizenship;**
3. **regional and European integration.**

The third dimension is especially important. National identity does not necessarily disappear as societies become increasingly integrated into European political and economic structures. Instead, national, civic, regional and European identities may coexist.

In this respect, Xhaferi's thought provides an important case for examining how a national identity can seek continuity while simultaneously operating within changing political frameworks.

6. Critical Discussion

Xhaferi's conception of national identity contains several analytically important contributions, but it also raises theoretical questions.

First, his emphasis on historical continuity, language, geography and ancestry corresponds more closely to an ethno-cultural conception of national identity than to a purely civic

conception. This provides a coherent explanation of how national belonging can persist across state borders.

Second, the emphasis on language and historical memory demonstrates that identity is not simply a political or legal category. It is reproduced through institutions, education, cultural practices and collective narratives.

Third, the distinction between nation-building and state-building provides a useful analytical tool for understanding the post-Yugoslav Balkans. A state can develop institutions without producing a single homogeneous national identity, while a national identity can remain meaningful across several states.

However, Xhaferi's approach also contains an essentialist tendency. By assigning a particularly strong and relatively stable character to elements such as blood, language, geography and historical continuity, his framework risks presenting national identity as more fixed than contemporary constructivist approaches would allow.

Anderson, Gellner and Hobsbawm, despite their differences, emphasize processes through which national identities are socially and politically produced. Smith, meanwhile, gives greater weight to ethnic memories and cultural continuity but still treats national identity as a historically constructed phenomenon.

From this perspective, Xhaferi's conception can be interpreted as occupying an intermediate position. It emphasizes historical and cultural continuity but also recognizes political institutions and the changing relationship between nation and state.

Another important question concerns multiple identities. An individual may simultaneously identify as Albanian, Kosovar, Macedonian citizen, European, Muslim, Catholic, secular, regional or local. These identities do not necessarily cancel one another. Xhaferi's emphasis on national identity is therefore best understood as a prioritization of one level of belonging rather than as a denial of all other identities.

The concept of "3GJ" also requires critical qualification. Blood, language and geography may be important components of a particular conception of national identity, but they cannot by themselves explain the complexity of modern national communities. Political institutions, citizenship, economic relations, migration, education, media and individual choice also contribute to identity formation.

Finally, Xhaferi's approach raises a broader question for contemporary European politics: **Can strong national identity coexist with civic pluralism and European integration?** The answer need not be negative. National identity can coexist with civic and European identities when political institutions recognize pluralism and when national belonging is not transformed into exclusion.

In this sense, the lasting relevance of Xhaferi's thought lies not in treating his conception as a final definition of Albanian identity, but in using it to understand the intellectual debates surrounding nationhood, statehood and identity in the contemporary Balkans.

7. Conclusions

The analysis demonstrated that nation and national identity occupy a central position in Arbën Xhaferi's political thought. His conception of Albanian identity is structured around historical continuity, language, cultural tradition, geography and religious tolerance, while these elements are connected through a broader idea of collective belonging.

The distinction between nation-building and state-building represents one of the most significant analytical elements of his thought. It allows national identity to be conceptualized as a phenomenon that does not necessarily coincide with the territorial and institutional boundaries of a state.

Language appears as both a practical and symbolic instrument of national cohesion. Historical continuity and tradition provide a framework for collective memory, while geography connects identity with territorial experience. Religious tolerance, meanwhile, allows Xhaferi to explain how different religious affiliations can coexist within a broader national identity.

At the same time, the critical analysis indicates that Xhaferi's conception contains an important tension between continuity and construction. His emphasis on relatively stable cultural and historical elements can be contrasted with theoretical approaches that emphasize the changing, negotiated and socially constructed nature of national identity.

The study therefore concludes that Xhaferi's contribution is most productively understood neither as a purely ethnic theory of nationhood nor as a civic theory centred exclusively on state citizenship. Rather, it represents a predominantly ethno-cultural conception that remains attentive to political institutions, statehood and the realities of a multiethnic and politically fragmented region.

The broader significance of his thought lies in the question of how national identity can be preserved without becoming incompatible with pluralism, citizenship and European integration. This question remains relevant not only for Albanians in the Western Balkans but also for contemporary debates about the relationship between nation, state and multiple forms of belonging.

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