



Othering Albanian Muslim Masculinities: A Case Study of Albanian Football Players

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Abstract: This paper will look at how Albanian Muslim masculinities are ‘othered’ in German-speaking and Albanian-speaking discourses. Whereas Western political circles tend to be reluctant regarding the Euro-Atlantic integration of Albania and Kosovo due to their Islamic cultural heritage, Albanian political elites have adopted a discursive strategy of erasure with regards to their Muslimness in pursuit of their Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Albanian football is an interesting case study, as a considerable part of Albanian footballers are famous in Europe and highlight Islam as an integral part of their Albanian identity. This paper suggests the following: Albanian Muslim men are tacitly ‘othered’ due to the inherent Orientalist episteme of Albanians in Euro-Atlantic discourses, and the othering of these masculinities becomes explicit when their behaviour is interpreted as ‘foreign’ to Western values and lifestyles – one such example would be to highlight Islam as part of their identity, as several Albanian footballers do. At worst, masculinities of Albanian Muslim footballers are described as ‘uncultivated’, unwilling to integrate into Western society, ideologically dangerous, and ‘non-European’. This characterization translates into subordinate masculinities toward European secular hegemonic masculinities.

Keywords: Albania – Football – Identity – Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

In Ildir Azizaj’s 2010 novel *Terxhuman*, the Western journalist visiting Albania for the coverage of a football match wonders how Albanians can be “both European in declarations, and Muslim in majority”¹ (Azizaj 2010, 33). The Albanian term “terxhuman” shares a root with the English “dragoman” designating the profession of ‘Oriental’ locals working and translating for Western journalists. To put it differently, the book of Azizaj also addresses Albanian Orientalism as

¹ This and the following translations of this article have been conducted by the author himself.



understood by Enis Sulstarova, in which Islam plays a major role (Sulstarova 2006, 10).

Amazement regarding this Albanian ‘peculiarity’ is common in Euro-Atlantic political circles as well. This European attitude has been problematized over the last two decades. It is, for instance, suggested that Europe is considering Albanians due to their Muslimness as the infinite internal ‘other’² since the 19th century (Blumi 1998, 527-530). Others argue that this European standpoint has had crucial impacts on Albanian societies where modern national identity is discursively constructed in a binary way: the ‘Western’ secular Albanian vs. the ‘Oriental’ Muslim one (Sulstarova 2013, 10). A third hypothesis goes as follows: if erasure of Muslimness is not possible, Albanian elites (be it in North Macedonia, Albania, or Kosovo) frame themselves as ‘good European Muslims’ as opposed to ‘bad Arab Muslims’, when dealing with their Euro-Atlantic counterparts (Rexhepi 2018a, 2215; Sadriu 2017, 540-541).

In this sense, one could summarize the situation as such: whereas Western political circles tend to be reluctant regarding the Euro-Atlantic integration of Albania and Kosovo due to their Islamic cultural heritage, Albanian political elites have adopted a discursive strategy of erasure with regards to their Muslimness in pursuit of their Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Becoming more and more important in Albanian societies, this article suggests that Albanian football is an interesting case study, as a considerable part of Albanian footballers highlight Islam as an integral part of their Albanian identity. The worldwide successes of football players highlighting their belief in Islam like Liverpool FC’s Xherdan Shaqiri or Arsenal FC’s Shkodran Mustafi did not pass unnoticed by Albanian intellectuals whose work is vital in substantiating Albanian Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Hence, the relationship between secular European and Albanian narratives on modern Albanian identity and how famous Albanian football players highlighting their religiosity are considered by these different elitist discourses – in Germany and Switzerland but also in Albania and Kosovo – will be examined in this paper.

² By ‘othering’, the following process is meant: marginalizing certain identities on the basis of their essentialist representation in hegemonic discourses. Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism* illustrated for example how the West’s representation of the Orient was vital to this binary relationship between Europe and the ‘others’. Fatima El-Tayeb showed that the process of ‘othering’ is also present in Germany. By attributing quasi-biological and/or cultural characteristics to certain social groups, the mainstream German discourse for instance ‘others’ them. Consequently, their perception ranges from not belonging to Germany to being incompatible with German society (El-Tayeb 2016a, 15). Isa Blumi showed how Albanians have been ‘othered’ in Euro-Atlantic discourses, by being represented “as an ideal type Balkan type – violent, independent and at times untrustworthy –“ in Western literary and journalistic works since the 19th century (Blumi 1998, 528).



Especially in the 21st century, Albanian football is about to become an important element in Albanian societies. Numerous sporting successes have laid the foundation of this development. On the national level, two milestones have been achieved: firstly, Albania's national team participated in a major football tournament for the first time in 2016, when they competed at Euro France, the UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) European Championship which took place in France. Secondly, the FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) granted Kosovo's football association full membership in the same year, hence becoming the second national team representing Albanians. On the individual level, two successes stand out: Shkodran Mustafi became the first Albanian to have won the FIFA World Cup, the most important international trophy, with the German national team in 2014, whereas Xherdan Shaqiri became the first Albanian to have won the UEFA Champions League, the most important club trophy, in the 2012-2013 season and a second time in the 2018-2019 season.

Gender as an analytical tool has already been used to better understand football (Dunning 1986, 80; Archetti 1994, 225; King 1997, 330; Cashmore and Parker 2003, 214; Burdsey 2011, 4). Some gendered analyses of worldwide known basketball players being racialized 'others' in the US – like Michael Jordan and Dennis Rodman – have been conducted as well (Andrews 1996, 125; Dunbar 2000, 263; Lafrance and Rail 2001, 36). It has been for example argued that North-American media “tended to stereotype African-Americans as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ black” basketball players – a point whose applicability to the othering processes of Albanian Muslim footballers will be examined later (Wilson 1997, 177). Muslim masculinities tend to also be ‘othered’ in Europe and their ‘otherness’ often is essentialized (El-Tayeb 2011, 1-3; El-Tayeb 2016b, 182). When it comes to Muslim footballers, they are at worst described as ‘uncultivated’, unwilling to integrate into Western society, ideologically dangerous, and ‘non-European’ – which can be considered as another form of Orientalism.³ Due to their Islamic socialization, Albanian men also can be

³ Although Maria Todorova highlights in her influential 1997 book *Imagining the Balkans* that the Balkans are depicted in a Orientalist manner, she distances herself from Said's Orientalism concept by refraining from considering the Balkans from a postcolonial perspective since the region is “predominantly Christian” and is lacking “colonial legacies” (Todorova 2009, 20). It is worth noting that Enis Sulstarova does explicitly refer to Said's Orientalism claiming that “the binary West vs Orient/East in political and intellectual Albanian discourses is imported from the European demeaning perspectives and concepts linked to the Orient which became part of Western culture, especially during the colonial era” (Sulstarova 2013, 10). When he addresses Todorova's concept of Balkanism, he argues that the different forms of Orientalisms “should not be seen as separated from each other, but as a continuity in which the differences between the West and the Orient/East, or Europe and Asia are used in order to create social and cultural differences between and within states” (Sulstarova 2013, 26). Referring inter alia to Maria



affected by this process. This essay will analyse the extent to which Albanian masculinities are ‘othered’ within the different discourses they have to navigate. This paper suggests the following: whereas Albanian Muslim men are tacitly ‘othered’ due to the inherent Orientalist episteme of Albanians in Euro-Atlantic discourses, the othering of these masculinities becomes explicit, when their behaviour is interpreted as ‘foreign’ to Western values and lifestyles – on such example would be to highlight Islam as part of their identity, as several Albanian footballers do.

Furthermore, the assumption that Muslim men are prone to violence, and do not approve of Western values, due to their belief in Islam has been criticised as simplifying and essentialist – often from a critical queer theory perspective (Amar 2011, 36; El-Tayeb 2011, 1-3; El-Tayeb 2016b, 182; Rexhepi 2016a, 146; Rexhepi 2016b, 32; Arat Kabaskal and Hasan 2018, 788). For example, Albanian Muslim masculinities are framed in a “binary and exclusionary Queer/Islam divisions that prevent the emergence of intersectional solidarities and subjectivities such as queer and Muslim” (Rexhepi 2016, 32).

Yet, regarding a proper conceptualisation of Albanian Muslim masculinities, one is confronted with many theoretical voids. Studying Black masculinities in the US, Tommy J. Curry also was confronted with a lacking theoretical framework, and made two arguments: First, “writers who discuss the violence committed against Black men have rarely referred to their subordinate male position” resulting in a lack of self-determination of the Black man’s identity, or to put it with Curry’s words, “[the Black man] becomes whatever the white world imposes upon him; whatever it desires him to be” (Curry 2018, 132 and 144). Second, he maintains that Black masculinities have been unfairly “theorized as sites of privilege” since their essentialised depiction not only ‘others’ them, but also erases their experienced discriminations, i.e. they also can be victims of sexual assaults, character assassination and discrimination at the labour market (Curry 2018, 150).

These reflections suggest that Albanian Muslim masculinities are subordinate to European Christian or secular masculinities. Even Raewyn Connell, the

Todorova’s work, Isa Blumi notes that “many scholars from the region, sensing their marginalized position within Western academic circles, have made efforts to distinguish the Balkans from the Ottoman Empire, arguing that they conform more closely to a Central European or Russian trajectory than to an Ottoman one (read: Islamic and un-Western past)” (Blumi 1998, 528). Piro Rexhepi also distances himself from the concept of Balkanism for the following reasons: “[f]irst, the erasure of Muslim histories undertaken by post-Ottoman nation-building historiographies in the Balkans has naturalized the “Christian” [...] past. [...] Finally, the third and perhaps more important reason relates to the narrow focus of colonial/postcolonial studies as well as its limited application in studies of contemporary politics and international relations” (Rexhepi 2018b, 23).



founder of the influential concept of hegemonic masculinities, has acknowledged that hegemonic masculinity as an oppressive privilege primarily applies to masculinities of the Euro-Atlantic hemisphere and the interplay between the different hierarchies of masculinities is a question of power (Connell 2016, 303 and 314). Hence, this article tries to understand how Albanian Muslim masculinities as subordinate masculinities in hegemonic discourses are viewed in elitist discourses, and how this process of ‘othering’ takes a gendered shape.

Methodologically, this article is based on a critical analysis of discourses in German-speaking and Albanian-speaking countries in the 21st century. In the first part, an overview about the socio-political backgrounds of Albanian football players will be given and it will be looked at how they are represented in the discourses of the German-speaking countries where most of them grew up. The second part will analyze the German and Swiss discourse with regards to famous Albanian football players, whereas the third part will look at how the Albanian discourses frame the footballers.

GROWING UP IN SWITZERLAND, OFTEN PLAYING FOR ALBANIA OR KOSOVO

With regards to Albanian footballers, it should be noted that their family backgrounds encompass Albanian societies within the Albanian lands in the Balkans and Albanian communities living in Europe. If one looks, for instance, at the 2018-2019 squads of Albania and Kosovo as presented in the leading footballing information database Transfermarkt, one notices that the majority of the players grew up in Western Europe, especially in Switzerland and Germany. Two thirds of Albania’s footballers were born in Albania, Kosovo, or North Macedonia, whereas only one-third of Kosovo’s players were born in the Albanian lands.

Moreover, Albanians do not only represent Kosovo or Albania on the pitch. In the 2018-2019 season, one Albanian played for Montenegro and six played for North Macedonia as one can see in Transfermarkt.

Regularly competing at the most important tournaments, Switzerland’s national team represents an interesting case since Albanians were key players for this national team over the last decade. In the 2018 FIFA World Cup, 4 Albanians (Xherdan Shaqiri, Granit Xhaka, Blerim Dzemali and Valon Behrami) for example played for the Swiss first eleven in every game. When it comes to other Albanians playing for the best national teams in the world, one should not forget Shkodran Mustafi who won the 2014 World Cup with the



German national team and Adnan Januzaj who competed with Belgium at the most important international tournaments over the last decade.

As the discursive import of the stereotypical representation of Albanians in German-speaking Europe through the buzzword ‘shaci’ to Kosovo shows, one can suggest that Albanian identity is ‘othered’ in German-speaking countries where around 740,000 Albanians live, the equivalent of 40 per cent of Kosovo’s population (Ferizaj 2018). Switzerland is a hub of the Albanian diaspora in the German-speaking countries comprising approximately 260,000 people – 3,1 per cent of the Swiss population (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2016). This means, Albanians are the biggest minority in Switzerland coming from a Muslim-majority population.

Especially in Switzerland, a discourse built on the binary ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ Albanians is used, best illustrated by the 2011 documentary *The good Albanians*, produced by the Swiss public broadcaster *SRF* (Ferizaj 2018). Two things should be highlighted here. Firstly, this discourse is in line with how black basketball players are viewed in the US and Canada (Wilson 1997, 177). Secondly, the Swiss discourse seems to be a continuation of Enis Sulstarova’s concept of Albanian Orientalism entailing the binary between ‘Western’ secular Albanians vs. ‘Oriental’ Muslim ones within Albanian societies (Sulstarova 2006, 10). From this perspective, othering Albanians in Switzerland results in the following: ‘good’ Albanians are secular and ‘Western’, while ‘bad’ Albanians are Muslim and ‘Oriental’.

OTHERING ALBANIAN MUSLIM MASCULINITIES IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

The most successful Albanian football players are Xherdan Shaqiri who won the Champions League two times and Shkodran Mustafi who won the World Cup with Germany in 2014. The two also highlight the importance of Islam in their lives. Furthermore, their sporting successes made them famous in the countries they grew up – Shaqiri in Switzerland, Mustafi in Germany. Due to their belief in Islam, they are sometimes also subject to controversies in German-speaking media. Before starting with the proper analysis of Mustafi and Shaqiri, it will be discussed how Muslims playing for Switzerland and Germany are viewed in general.

A 2018 article published by the renowned Swiss tabloid *Blick* is telling in this regard: it dealt with the behaviour of Muslims playing for the Swiss national



soccer team – 6 Albanians and 1 Bosniak – during the Islamic month of fasting Ramadan if taking place during major football tournaments (Kern and Wegmann 2018). First of all, the article refers to the 7 Muslim footballers as “secondos”, a notion designating children of immigrants (Kern and Wegmann 2018). In this way, the difference between ‘real’ Swiss and ‘un-Swiss’ citizens is implicated. When Islam is addressed, the othering of these players is even more accentuated. A comparison between two Albanians playing for Switzerland, Shani Tarashaj and Valon Behrami, leads to the following result: Tarashaj “abstained from drinks last summer during Ramadan,” whereas Behrami “likes enjoying a good glass of wine with raw ham and salami” (Kern and Wegmann 2018). Behrami is associated with attributes common with ‘real’ Swiss culture (wine, raw ham, and salami), while Tarashaj’s behaviour is described with elements ‘foreign’ to Swissness (fasting during Ramadan), and he, therefore, represents ‘un-Swissness’. If a Muslim male body represents ‘un-Swissness’, his loyalty to Switzerland constantly tends to be scrutinized. Hence, the *Blick* article suggests how Albanian Muslim footballers are ‘othered’ on the basis of the discursive categories of the ‘good’, secular, and ‘Western’ Albanian man (Behrami) and the ‘bad’, Muslim, and ‘Oriental’ Albanian man (Tarashaj).

This representation also is compatible with how Germany sees Muslims playing for their national team. The German daily *Die Welt*, for example, published an article about the ‘conflicts’ between Ramadan and major football tournaments involving the German international Shkodran Mustafi in 2014 (Wolff 2014).

THE GERMAN DISCOURSE AND SHKODRAN MUSTAFI

Born in the German city of Bad Hersfeld on April 17, 1992, Mustafi’s home in the Albanian lands is Gostivar, a city in North Macedonia. Hence, he is part of the Albanian diaspora growing up in Germany. Due to his successful football career, he regularly is covered by German media.

A few months after winning the World Cup with Germany in 2014, the influential German weekly *Der Spiegel* wrote an in-depth profile on the football player (Kramer 2014). The author of the piece consistently alluded to Shkodran Mustafi’s ‘un-Germanness’, even though he mentioned that Shkodran is the third generation of his family living in Germany. Refraining from explicitly denying Shkodran Mustafi’s Germanness, the article referred to common gendered stereotypes regarding Muslims in Germany in order to ‘other’ Shkodran Mustafi:



a ‘plebby’ passion for expensive cars – it is told how Shkodran buys his car-loving father a new black Mercedes S-Class; family-clan-like-structures – one learns that the footballer’s agents are his father and a Turkish businessman; and practising Islam – the footballer explains how reading the Quran helps him to relax before important matches and the journalist observes a prayer chain in Mustafi’s car (Kramer 2014). It should be highlighted that these gendered stereotypes commonly are used in order to describe the ‘foreignness’ of Muslims in Germany.

In 2015, Mustafi was playing for the Spanish La Liga team Valencia CF. Due to his belief in Islam, he refused to give a press conference with a club sponsoring beer in front of him. This made headlines in Germany’s biggest newspapers pointing to Mustafi’s ‘un-German’ behaviour and, hence, alluded to how Muslim masculinities are unwilling to integrate into German culture since they refuse to drink beer, a symbol of Germanness (*Bild* 2015; *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2015; *Sport1* 2015; Rütten 2015; *Welt* 2016). The famous German tabloid *Bild*, for example, aimed at this interpretation, highlighting in the title of the article that “Muslim Mustafi does not drink alcohol” (*Bild* 2015).

In 2016, a *Tagesspiegel* journalist announced that he will name his son to be born in the following days after the first German goal scorer of the Euro France – adding that “I am quite sure that Mustafi [a defender] will not score” (*Bild* 2016). In the group stage game against Ukraine, it was indeed Shkodran Mustafi who scored the first goal for Germany. The journalist refused to name his son “Shkodran”. In *Tagesspiegel*, this decision was justified by the reason that Shkodran would have been a first name that would have required always to be spelt out (Fiedler 2016). In other words, Shkodran as name is not perceived as German enough. This suggests the following: even though Mustafi represents German football in the international arena, the Albanian Muslim footballer is still not ‘really’ German. In terms of gendered ‘othering’, it substantiates Curry’s argument that “[the Black man] becomes whatever the white world imposes upon him; whatever it desires him to be” (Curry 2018, 144) since it is not up to Mustafi to decide about his identity. It also is in line with what Fatima El-Tayeb says about the ‘othering’ process in Germany: Regardless the fact of how long an ‘other’ is living in Germany, he always is treated as having just arrived to the country, or to use El-Tayeb’s framing, “the compulsive and everlasting repetition of the first encounter with the stranger” (El-Tayeb 2016a, 17). If the ‘other’s’ Germanness gets accepted is a deeply gendered process since only through this acceptance the other can escape his role of subordinate masculinity.

In a 2016 interview with the German magazine *Sport Bild*, the journalist stated that “Islam practising Mustafi maintains his relationship to his [Albanian]



ancestors through his religion” (Reis 2016). Moreover, Islam is “very, very important” to Mustafi (Reis 2016). “I try to live according to Islam. [...] when we play in the Champions League [...] I cannot pray five times a day,” Mustafi said in this interview (Reis 2016). The footballer also is asked to give his opinion on Islam in Germany, but he avoids to give a political answer (Reis 2016). This question is even more interesting if one considers the context: 2016 was a year, in which “[a]nti-Muslim sentiments [were] supported by roughly half of the population in Germany” (Lewicki 2016, 215). The journalist’s insistence on Mustafi’s religiosity suggests two things: first, the constant anxiety of the German mainstream discourse toward an Albanian Muslim wearing the German dress during major football tournaments. Second and consequently, it illustrates that Albanian Muslim identities are ‘othered’ in Germany through representing his belief in Islam to his Albanian identity and through conveying the impression that his Islamic piety represents his ‘non-European backwardness’. What is achieved through this is to consolidate his subordinate and ‘non-German’ masculinity in comparison to Christian or secular footballers like for example Real Madrid’s Toni Kroos or FC Bayern München’s Thomas Müller.

Mustafi’s participation in the rap culture is interesting in so far as “Hip Hop represents the central means of articulation for ‘ethnic Outsiders’ in contemporary Germany” (El-Tayeb 2003, 482). In the 2019 music video “Olé Olé” by Mero and Brado, Shkodran Mustafi is to be seen several times (Mero 2019). Mero is a successful artist, whereas there is barely information available about his feature guest (Gaul 2019). The clip with Shkodran Mustafi has been viewed nearly 12 million times at the moment this article has been written. In 2019, Mustafi also gave an interview for the German hip hop magazine *Backspin* where he spoke about his favourite rappers; he also used this interview to highlight his Albanian identity by stating that his family is from Albania, while drinking çay in a Turkish restaurant in London (Mustafi 2019).⁴ When Xatar, one of the most famous rappers in Germany, sent his Eid wishes to his fans on August 11, 2019, one saw him posing next to Mustafi in the Emirates Stadium, the home ground of his club Arsenal FC (@Xatar, August 11, 2019). In the German Hip Hop culture proving his Germanness is not required (El-Tayeb 2003, 464-465). This is why one could suggest that Mustafi’s presence in German

⁴ This is worth noting since he technically is from North Macedonia. Yet, when speaking to a German audience he decided to simplify the answer by saying that his country of origin is Albania. The reason might be linked to the fact that very little is known about Albanian history in Germany. By saying he is from Albania, he conveys the message that he is Albanian. If he were to say he is from North Macedonia, the German audience could easily get the impression that he is a Slavic Orthodox Macedonian.



rap counters the German mainstream narrative on Albanians based on an Orientalist episteme.

THE SWISS DISCOURSE AND XHERDAN SHAQIRI

Born in the Kosovar city of Gjilan on October 10, 1991, Xherdan Shaqiri grew up in the region of Basel, Switzerland. He has won the most prestigious trophy of club football, the Champions League, two times with two different teams: with FC Bayern München in the 2012-2013 season and with Liverpool FC in the 2018-2019 season. Ever since his sporting breakthrough at FC Basel in the 2009-2010 season, Shaqiri has regularly been covered by Swiss media.

At the beginning of his career, Swiss media spoke highly of Shaqiri. In 2010, he, for instance, was compared to football legends like Lionel Messi or Diego Maradona and was announced to be the “new superstar of Swiss football” (Clalüna 2010). This pristine reputation was tarnished in the subsequent years, mostly by events that had nothing to do with his performance on the pitch. Shaqiri wore for example football shoes embroidered with three flags: the Swiss, the Albanian, and the Kosovar. In one article on his football shoes, the tabloid *Blick* first referred to a Shaqiri statement where he allegedly said “50 per cent of my heart belongs to Kosovo” and then explained that this is why “he displays this sense of home on his kicks” (*Blick* 2018a). When Shaqiri won the Champions League for the first time, *Blick* highlighted that he celebrated this win not only with a Swiss flag but also with a Kosovar one (*Blick* 2018b). What is alluded to in both occasions is that Shaqiri’s holding onto his Albanian identity shows his unwillingness to fully integrate into Swiss society. In other words, it suggests Shaqiri’s lacking Swissness. Viewed from a gender perspective, this translates to the fact that Shaqiri, even though being one of the best footballers in Switzerland, represents a subordinate masculinity.

In 2015, a photo with Xherdan Shaqiri and the former Imam of the Grand Mosque in Prishtina, Kosovo’s capital, Shefqet Krasniqi made headlines in Switzerland. The Swiss tabloid *20 Minuten* published, for example, an article entitled “Shaqiri poses with a radical imam” (Llugiqi 2015). At the time the photo appeared, Krasniqi was accused of inciting terrorism, whereas he was acquitted of this charge in 2018 (Leposhtica 2018). Referring to Kosovar daily *Koha Ditore*, the *20 Minuten* article explained that according to Krasniqi, “upholding values such as tradition, culture and religion was vital to the successful football star [Shaqiri], and he [Krasniqi] had given him some books”



(Llugiqi 2015). The Swiss public broadcaster *SRF* wrote an op-ed on this issue which is interesting for three reasons (*SRF* 2015). First, it alludes to Shaqiri as an ‘unintelligent’ and ‘uncultivated’ person since the piece finished with the following suggestion: “Shaqiri, be quiet now, play football and delegate the reasoning to someone who is capable of it” (*SRF* 2015). Second, this *SRF* article is based on the ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ Albanian discourse in Switzerland framing Shaqiri as a ‘bad’ (meaning Muslim and ‘Oriental’) Albanian due to his (un)intended flirtings with ‘radical’ Islam (*SRF* 2015). Third, “the emotional way we [Swiss society] deal with Islam”, is one explanation for the turmoils the photo made, could be interpreted as a synonym for an existing Islamophobic atmosphere in a country where “[a]nti-immigration sentiments, right-wing politics and an anti-Muslim attitude in the tabloid media” were present in 2015 (*SRF* 2015; Orakzai 2015, 530). What is alluded to here is not only Shaqiri’s ‘un-Swiss’ behaviour but the Albanian Muslim male ‘other’ also is represented as potentially dangerous in terms of political ideology.

Playing with four Albanians in their starting eleven, Switzerland won the 2018 World Cup match against Serbia with 2 to 1. The goal scorers for Switzerland, Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri, celebrated their goals by forming the double-head eagle of Albania’s flag with their hands. Except for being interpreted as provocations against Serbia, these celebrations caused a vivid debate in Switzerland (Schächter 2018). An op-ed by the leading Swiss daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* summarized the impacts of this match as follows: It not only provoked new debates about the integration of “secondos”, in the Swiss national team, these actions triggered debates about integration and political sensitivity in general (Burgener 2018). One could hence suggest that this debate was caused by the stereotype of the Albanian Muslim male aggressivity, if not implying a politically dangerous potential of this gendered ‘other’, it at least proves that he is considered ‘un-Swiss’ and represents a subordinate masculinity.

Shaqiri uploaded a photo with the Islamic comment “elhamdulillah” (could be translated as “praise be to God”) on Twitter, after scoring the decisive lead for Switzerland against Serbia in the 2018 World Cup (@XS_11official, June 22, 2018). He also posted a photo with the same comment, after winning the Champions League for the second time in the 2018-2019 season (@XS_11official, June 1, 2019). In 2019, an article by the famous Swiss daily *Tages-Anzeiger* entitled “Shaqiri irritates [the Swiss audience] with his Arabic greeting” addressed Shaqiri’s “elhamdulillah”-posts (Robelli 2019). The piece is interesting for three reasons. First, it compared Xherdan Shaqiri to the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan due to the way the two highlight their belief in



Islam (Robelli 2019). Second, it is argued that Xherdan Shaqiri's lack of education is the reason for his inability to clearly define the boundaries of his identity – an argument referred to Blerim Latifi, a famous political advisor in Kosovo and a defender of a secular Albanian identity (Robelli 2019). To put it differently, the article argues that considering Islam as part of Albanian identity is not 'really' Albanian, which is in line with the hypothesis of the Albanian elites' erasure of Muslimness elaborated in the introduction. Third, Enver Robelli writes not only for Swiss newspapers but also for Kosovar ones. Hence, this article illustrates three aspects of the othering process of Albanian Muslim masculinities in the Swiss discourse. First, Shaqiri's identification with Islam is partly explained by his 'uncultivated' and 'unintelligent' being, alluding to the hypothesis that practising Islam is 'backward'. Second, Shaqiri's comparison with Erdoğan, described in the article as an autocrat, illustrates that Albanian Muslim masculinities are prone to dangerous ideological views in opposition to Swiss Christian or secular hegemonic masculinities. Third, Albanian men practising Islam in Switzerland are not 'really' Swiss.

Although one could easily argue that Xherdan Shaqiri is the most successful footballer in Switzerland in the 21st century, the tone of the Swiss press is derisive towards him. A 2015 *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* article mocked Shaqiri's career by referring to the following tweet which apparently made a lot of Swiss sport journalists laugh: "By moving to Stoke, Xherdan Shaqiri has become the first person born in Albania to end up somewhere worse" (Krogerus 2015). In 2017, a *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* article about Shaqiri's career was published where the journalist agreed that debates about him always imply silent accusations about his career management and his way of life (Steffen 2017). In this article, it also is highlighted that Shaqiri criticized the harsh tone against him in the media: "Journalists always are writing more critically towards me than other players" (Steffen 2017). In a *Tages-Anzeiger* article published in 2016, former Swiss international and FC Bayern München player Ciriaco Sforza came to Shaqiri's defence: "It is not fair and totally disrespectful to criticize exclusively Shaqiri" (Niggli 2016). Whereas the funny element of the tweet is based on an Orientalist episteme of Albanians, the silent accusations of his way of life primarily point to his Muslimness. Hence, one can suggest that it is due to his Albanian Muslim male identity that he is 'othered' and seen as an 'un-Swiss' footballer.



THE COMPLICITY OF ALBANIAN DISCOURSES IN OTHERING ALBANIAN MUSLIM MASCULINITIES

In 2015, a Kosovar leading daily *Zëri* published an article about Albanian footballers who are famous in Europe and expose their Muslimness in public (*Zëri* 2015). Except for Shkodran Mustafi and Xherdan Shaqiri, the piece dealt with 7 footballers and pointed to many others accentuating Islam (*Zëri* 2015). Whereas the piety of Mërgim Mavraj, a former player of the German Bundesliga and Albanian international, was highlighted, Lorik Cana, a former player of Paris Saint-Germain FC and Albania's most-capped player who retired in 2016, was described as “unlike the others, publically dealing more with national than religious matters” (*Zëri* 2015). In 2016, the online newspaper *Telegrafi* wrote about the ten most famous Muslim footballers in Europe (*Telegrafi* 2016). Four Albanians appeared in that list: the Belgian international and former Manchester United FC player Adnan Januzaj figured due to “his love for his [Muslim] religion” in the ranking (*Telegrafi* 2016). The first place was given to Mërgim Mavraj who caused debate after rejecting a beer advertisement on the tracksuit of the Albanian national team (*Telegrafi* 2016). Shaqiri and Mustafi are the other two Albanians in this ranking (*Telegrafi* 2016). What the two articles have in common is the focus on Albanian male Muslimness exposed publicly in European spheres. Furthermore, one could argue their views on Muslim masculinities are quite similar to those observed in Switzerland and Germany. For example, secularity is highlighted (Cana as a role model of observant Albanian footballers) and amazement if Albanian male Muslimness leads to ‘un-European’ behaviour (Mavraj refusing to advertise beer). Hence, Albanian discourses are not only complicit in ‘othering’ Albanian Muslim masculinities, they also often represent them with a doubtful undertone contributing in being also complicit in representing these masculinities as subordinate to secular ones.

Representatives of the Albanian elites have a critical view on the footballers' tendency to highlight their Muslimness. In 2017, the leading Kosovar daily *Koha Ditore* published an op-ed written by Enver Robelli, who also is a journalist in Switzerland, on the relationship between Albania's and Kosovo's national team and Islam (Robelli 2017). According to him, accentuating Islam is counterproductive in the Albanian context since “it automatically suggests to their [non-Muslim] compatriots that their country is somewhere in the periphery” (Robelli 2017). The author also equates the footballers' belief in Islam to their inability to integrate into Western societies (Robelli 2017). Written by the former political advisor to the president of Albania Mentor Nazarko, the



Albanian online newspaper *Konica* published an article dealing with the same topic (Nazarko 2017). Taking into consideration Albania's and Kosovo's team, the footballers' tendency toward religiosity here is explained by "a lack of good education" (Nazarko 2017). A point which is made by the Kosovar political advisor Blerim Latifi with regards to Xherdan Shaqiri as well (Robelli 2019). It also is argued that highlighting Muslimness as footballers do in the Albanian context "can lead to interstate problems [and] can potentially damage our national reputation" (Nazarko 2017). Whereas it has been suggested that Albanian elites tend to erase Muslimness from Albanian identity at the beginning of this essay, the two examples here illustrated this hypothesis by arguing that if Albanians accentuate Islam they are perceived as 'non-European' by Euro-Atlantic elites and also represented as subordinate to European secular masculinities. Furthermore, the examined authors equated observant Muslim footballers to a lack of 'culture', pointed to the ideologically dangerous potential of Islamic piety, and equate believing in Islam with an unwillingness to integrate into Western societies – three attributes that have been used in the Swiss and German discourse as well. Hence, it can be suggested that Albanian elites are complicit in othering Albanian Muslim masculinities through recycling gendered stereotypes used in Germany and Switzerland. A concrete link between the German-speaking and Albanian-speaking elites is Robelli who is active in the two discourses.

CONCLUSION

Western political circles tend to consider Albanians with a certain amazement due to their Muslimness. In pursuit of their Euro-Atlantic roadmap, Albanian political elites have reacted to this Western attitude by discursively erasing their Muslimness. Albanian football players are interesting in this regard because many of them are famous in the West and highlight Islam as an integral part of their Albanian identity. In order to better understand this intersection between Muslim masculinities and modern Albanian identity, the following hypothesis has been suggested in this article: whereas Albanian Muslim men are tacitly 'othered' due to the inherent Orientalist episteme of Albanians in Euro-Atlantic discourses, the othering of these masculinities becomes explicit, when their behaviour is interpreted as 'foreign' to Western values and lifestyles – on such example would be to highlight Islam as part of their identity, as several Albanian footballers do. In these cases, they are described as 'uncultivated', unwilling to integrate into



Western society, ideologically dangerous, and ‘non-European’. In terms of gendered representation, this ‘othering’ process translates into subordinate masculinities toward European secular hegemonic masculinities.

The gender perspective proved useful to shed light on different aspects of Albanian masculinities of the 21st century. The case study of Albanian footballers illustrated for example that it is very common to identify as Albanian Muslim for football players, despite the fact that the Albanian mainstream discourses maintain a secular Albanian identity. These opposing visions on Albanian identity are solved by the power holding Albanian elites through adopting a derogative language toward the footballers. It is worth noting that these negative depictions are imported by Western discourses on Muslim men. When one looks in greater detail at these Western narratives, one observes that the essentialist stereotypes used to describe Albanian Muslim footballers in Germany and Switzerland are not only ‘othering’, but they are gendered as well. It is important to keep in mind that this intersectional aspect leads to the fact that Albanian Muslim footballers represent subordinate masculinities, and whether they are praised or stigmatised depends on the power monopoly of the society they are living in.

This paper can be embedded in two bigger contextes. First, it shed light on how ‘foreigners’ stemming from majority Muslim populations are seen in European discourses. Second, this work joins the ranks of the question of how Islam is viewed in Albanian discourses in the 21st century. Since the extent to which Albanian identity is ‘othered’ in the German-speaking countries has been a main subject of this paper, further research could be for instance conducted by analyzing to what degree the representation of Albanianness fits into the concept of German Orientalism in continuation of Edward Said’s work (Kontje 2004; Berman 1997; Said 1978).

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