The Historical Evolution of Albanian Writing and Efforts to Standardize the Alphabet Within Religious and Cultural Influences

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Abstract

This article examines in detail the continuous efforts to establish a written form of the Albanian language up to the Congress of Manastir (1908), situating this process within its historical, cultural, and political context. Central to the discussion are the earliest written records of Albanian dating back to the fifteenth century, as well as the parallel use of several different alphabets, including the Latin, Greek, and Arabic scripts, which reflected religious divisions and foreign influences on the Albanian population. The article analyzes the contributions of clergy, scholars, and Albanian National Awakening figures to the efforts to create an alphabet suited to the phonetic structure of the Albanian language, as well as the role of cultural societies, printing houses, and Albanian-language schools in promoting literacy in the mother tongue. Particular attention is given to the numerous political and administrative obstacles imposed by the Ottoman Empire, which delayed the process of linguistic unification. The Congress of Manastir is presented as the culmination of these long-standing efforts, where a national consensus on the Albanian alphabet was achieved, laying a solid foundation for the development of education, literature, and Albanian national consciousness. The study aims to highlight the historical and cultural significance of this process in shaping Albanian national identity.

Keywords: Albanian language; Albanian writing; Albanian alphabet; linguistic efforts; Congress of Manastir; Albanian National Awakening; alphabet standardization; national identity

1. Introduction

To gain a better understanding of the historical diversity of the Albanian alphabet and the efforts to standardize its writing, contemporary scholars have analyzed the documents and different systems used over the centuries. In this context, the renowned scholar of Albanian literature and folklore, Robert Elsie (1950-2017), published in London his 118-page work, *"Albanian Alphabets - Borrowed and Invented"***.** This study provides a systematic and historical overview of the various ways in which the Albanian language was recorded in early documents up to the beginning of the 20th century. The book examines the use of the Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Cyrillic alphabets in Albanian territories and highlights the invention and use of several unique local systems for writing Albanian, reflecting the autonomous efforts of Albanian communities to preserve and represent their native language through writing. This historical and comparative approach emphasizes not only the diversity of writing forms but also their significance in affirming Albanian cultural and linguistic identity.

Since the 18th and 19th centuries, Albanians began to exhibit a growing need to write their language. These efforts, despite historical and religious limitations, became an expression of national consciousness and the desire to preserve culture and identity. Early Albanian alphabets were based on foreign writing systems - Latin, Greek, Cyrillic, and even Arabic - reflecting the cultural and religious influences of the time, as well as the creativity and innovative spirit of Albanian authors. These endeavors represented a way to assert the Albanian language, despite the barriers imposed by foreign powers, the Ottoman administration, and religious authorities, such as the Orthodox Patriarch, who often regarded efforts to write in Albanian as a threat to Greek and Russian influence.

In this context, the efforts of Albanian clerics and scholars - whether Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim - took different forms. Catholics primarily used the Latin alphabet for schools and religious texts, Orthodox Christians often employed the Greek alphabet for translations of religious writings and materials, while Muslims developed Albanian literature in the Arabic script, known as *bejtexhinj* or *"alhamiado"*. These movements demonstrate that, despite religious differences, Albanians utilized the tools available to assert their language, revealing a clear effort to build a stable linguistic and cultural identity.

Prominent figures such as Dhaskal Todhri, Jani Vellara, Naum Veqilharxhi, Kostandin Kristoforidhi, Hasan Tahsini, Rexhep Voka, and Hafiz Ali Korça, among others, contributed to the creation of primers and original alphabets for the Albanian language, aiming not only at teaching reading and writing but also at fostering unity among the religious communities and different regions of the country. Each of these authors introduced particular advances and innovations, including the adaptation of foreign letters, the creation of new symbols for Albanian sounds, and the preparation of didactic and religious texts. These efforts, although often limited in their circulation, constitute an important part of the history of the Albanian language and laid the foundation for the standardized, unified alphabet that Albanians would later establish at the Congress of Manastir.

This article aims to document and analyze the chronology of these efforts, placing them within the historical, cultural, and religious context of the Balkans in the 18th and 19th centuries. It highlights the role of key figures and various contributors, illustrating the continuous endeavor to establish a national alphabet and a standardized written language. The article also emphasizes the tensions between religious authorities and Albanian progressives, providing a better understanding of the challenges Albanians faced in promoting their language and education.

Through this study, the importance of these efforts is underscored in preserving national identity, expanding education in the Albanian language, and affirming Albanian culture during a complex historical period. The history of the Albanian alphabet and education before the Manastir Congress is more than a linguistic story: it is a narrative of national consciousness, resistance to external influences, and the effort to build a solid cultural and educational foundation for future generations.

2. The Need and Challenges of Writing the Albanian Language

Last year, Robert Elsie (1950-2017), a specialist in Albanian literature and folklore, published in London a 118-page book entitled *Albanian Alphabets - Borrowed and Invented*. The book presents the divergent forms in which the old languages of the Balkans were recorded, based on the earliest documents up to the beginning of the 20th century. These include the adoption of the Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Cyrillic scripts, but what is most interesting is the invention of several local systems for writing Albanian.

Most of these old alphabets are now forgotten and remain unknown even to many Albanians themselves. The alphabets invented for writing Albanian date from the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century, a period during which Albanians - or at least part of their cultural elite- felt the need to write their mother tongue using a distinct and independent alphabet.

Among all the peoples that comprised the ethnic and cultural mosaic of the Ottoman Empire, Albanians were the only ones who did not have a standardized written language and, consequently, no national literature in the full sense of the term. As part of the Ottoman administration, the languages of culture, knowledge, and governance in the Albanian territories were Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. Turkish served as the language of the state administration, Arabic as the language of Islamic scholarly literature, while Persian was used mainly in literary creativity *[Osmani, 2003]*.

A considerable number of authors of Albanian origin wrote in these languages, among whom Suzi of Prizren, Mesihi of Prishtina, Jahja Bej Dukagjini (1496-1582), Ahmed Bej Dukagjini, Ajazi, Lutfi Pasha, Koçi Beu, and others are notable *[Osmani, 1998]*.

Orthodox Albanians, who remained loyal to the Orthodox Church and the rigid traditions of Byzantine heritage, did not enjoy the freedom to use their native language for educational and cultural purposes. This restriction came from the Church itself, as its traditional languages - and consequently the only ones permissible for writing - were Greek in the southern regions and Slavic in the north.

The third cultural authority influencing the educational and cultural life of the Albanians was the Roman Catholic Church, which recognized only Latin and Italian as official languages. Writing in Albanian, regardless of the alphabet used, represented a symbolic act of resistance against foreign political and cultural powers that ruled or exerted influence over Albanian territories.

By the last quarter of the 18th century, around 70% of the Muslim population attended schools where instruction was conducted exclusively in Ottoman Turkish; Orthodox Albanians attended Greek-language schools, while Catholics (Jesuits and Franciscans) established schools in Shkodër, where teaching was carried out in the national language. However, due to the absence of a standardized written language, even in these institutions Ottoman Turkish, Greek, or Latin was used *[Sota, 2012]*.

In this context, Central Albania, where the three main religious communities coexisted and intermingled, was the first region to feel the need for creating a distinct alphabet for the Albanian language, one that would be suitable and acceptable for all three religious communities.

By 1878, when the Istanbul Commission for the Alphabet Issue was established, publications in the Albanian language were extremely rare. This situation also explains the spread of the well-known "fable" that "the Albanian's book was eaten by the cat" *[Kaleshi, 2013]*, which symbolizes the lack and disappearance of books in the mother tongue. On the other hand, in the absence of a common alphabet, official historiography tended to regard writings in Albanian using the Latin alphabet as progressive, while those written in Arabic or Ottoman scripts were considered regressive, attributing to their authors conservative tendencies and positions opposed to national progress and development *[Kaleshi, 2013]*.

Even today, there are tendencies to place in opposition the concepts of *"school"*, *"language"*, and *"national identity"* against the terms *"cleric"*, *"clergy"*, and *"religious leaders"*. creating an artificial and often unfair division in interpreting Albanian cultural history. Robert Elsie does not include all the efforts made by Albanians to create an alphabet for writing the Albanian language. Nevertheless, regardless of how events unfolded after the Congress of Manastir, the significance of these early efforts should not be forgotten, as they constitute an important foundation for Albanian linguistic and national consciousness.

The earliest texts or works in the Albanian language written in the Latin alphabet were primarily translations and religious texts, such as: *Formula e pagëzimit* (1452), *Meshari* (1555), *E mbsuame e krështerë* (1592), *Doktrina e Krishterë* (1618), the *Latin-Epirote Dictionary* (1635), *Çeta e profetëve* (1685), and others *[Myderrizi, 1955]*. These publications were permitted by the Propaganda Fide of Rome *[Shuteriqi, 1979]*, but without any direct national purpose. Their main objective was to curb the process of Islamization and the spread of schism.

The situation was different within the framework of the Orthodox Church, which enjoyed a dominant position in the culture of the Southern Balkans and consistently opposed the use of the Albanian language in writing. For the Orthodox hierarchy, writing in Albanian was considered a "grave sin," as it was associated with the languages of Protestants, Catholics, and even atheists *[Zamputi, 1965]*.

Despite these oppositions, by the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a number of documents written in Albanian using the Greek alphabet appeared, indicating a growing interest in writing Albanian within Orthodox communities. These documents were mainly Orthodox religious texts that had been translated. In this context, the first efforts to translate the Bible are included, such as the translation of the *New Testament* by **Vangjel Meksi** (1822) *[Hysa, 2000]*. In addition to the *New Testament*, **Konstandin Kristoforidhi** translated the *Psalms* several decades later, making an important contribution to the development of written Albanian (1827-1895) *[Ibid]*.

Texts in Albanian writen in the Cyrillic alphabet, which was the alphabet of Slavic liturgy, were rarer and appeared mainly in the Orthodox communities of Western Macedonia *[Ibid]*. The fear that the Serbian and Greek Churches felt regarding the massive Islamization of Albanians prompted these two religious institutions, during the 16th-17th centuries, to engage in negotiations for the union and unification of the Orthodox rite, as well as to establish contacts with the Catholic Church, headed by the Pope. However, these efforts did not yield results, on the one hand because it was understood that such a union would primarily favor the Greek and Serbian rites, and on the other hand because, paradoxically, these developments contributed to accelerating the process of Islamization *[Hysa, 2000]*.

Propaganda Fide, established in 1622, faced two main adversaries to the Catholic faith: the mass Islamization of the population and the spread of the Slavic schism, which was supported by Russian Orthodox propaganda and aimed at bringing Albanians back into schism, or in other words, at Slavicizing them *[Relacione e dokumente historike për Historinë e Shqipërisë, 1977]*. In this context, it represented the Holy See's final effort to maintain its influence, using as its main tool the religious book written in the language of the people, that is, in the Albanian language.

The main goal of this policy was to facilitate the acquisition of Christian doctrine, especially for priests who did not have sufficient command of the Latin language. These papal concessions were initially utilized by the Arbores of Italy, with the publication of **Lekë Matrënga**'s work (1592). However, the dissemination of these texts remained quite limited, as they circulated primarily within clerical circles and, perhaps, among a small network of Catholic merchants from northern Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia *[Krasniqit, 2017]*.

While the Catholic community directed its religious and cultural attention toward Rome, Albanian Muslims were under the Sultan's rule from the 16th century onwards. The Arabic alphabet was introduced in Albania during the 14th–15th centuries, but until the mid-17th century, no significant attempts to write Albanian in this script are known, except for the case of the Bogdana family *[Dibra, 2022]*. Its use was primarily in Muslim poetic literature (aljamiado), among the earliest authors of which was **Dervish Hasani**, who clearly demonstrated that by the 17th century significant achievements had been made in the field of Albanian Islamic culture. This new Albanian literature served as an important catalyst for the integration of Albanian culture *[Pirraku, 1989]*.

In the 18th century, **Muçi Zade** is mentioned as the author of a poem dedicated to coffee (1725), which also reflects the cultural and social dimension of the time:

"For the servants of Fatima,
For the good of Mary,
Do not leave me with the juice of bitterness,
My Lord, do not leave us without coffee" [Dibra, 2022].

This tradition was later continued by other poets, such as **Nezim Frakulla** (1680-1760), **Sulejman Naibi** (c. 1771), **Hasan Zyko Kamberi** (18th century), **Muhamet Çami Kyçyku** (1784-1844), **Zenel Bastari** (1765/1770 - 1831), **Mulla Dervish Peja**, **Tahir Efendi Boshnjaku**, **Dalip Frashëri**, **Shahin Bej Frashëri**, **H. Ali Ulqinaku**, **Rexhep Voka**, and others *[Sota, 2014]*. While Catholic writings in the Latin alphabet were primarily focused on religious texts, the Albanian aljamiado literature had begun to develop its activity in secular fields as well.

The term *"aljamiado"* is usually used to refer to the *"bejtexhi literature"*, but it does not encompass the entire Albanian literary output written in the Arabic script. This was not foreign literature; on the contrary, it was written in the Albanian language by Albanian authors for Albanian readers. The origin of the term *"aljamiado"* comes from the Arabic word *al-'ajamīya*, meaning "foreign". Because Albanian was written in a foreign script, as were many other languages at the time, this did not make the language or its literature foreign. According to Osman Myderrizi, it is simply "Albanian literature in the Arabic script" *[Elsie, 2017]*.

Eqrem Çabeji notes that the various alphabets used throughout history are nothing more than "graphic expressions". Albanian writings in the Arabic script, in a way, disrupted the dominance of traditional religious texts and opened new space for the development of Albanian literature *[Elsie, 2017]*.

Regarding this type of Albanian literature in the Arabic script, Injac Zamputi emphasizes: "*We may call them* bejte *and* bejtexhinj*, whether evaluated positively or disparaged artistically, but their noble purpose and function in affirming Albanian national consciousness, as well as their role in the development of the culture of the Albanian community, must be acknowledged" [Çabej, 1976]*.

By no means was **Nezim Frakulla** the first to compose poetry in Albanian according to Oriental styles and models, but he surpassed his predecessors by creating a complete and substantial work, through which he earned recognition as the founder of a new literary current. He himself takes pride in having elevated and enriched the Albanian language, being regarded as the first to write a *divan* in Albanian *[Kaleshi, 2013]*.

Following him came **Sulejman Naibi** (c. 1771), the first lyrical poet to celebrate love and the beauty of women in the Albanian language:

> *"Your curls, the hyacinth flowers,*
> *You are the beauty of the garden you enter,*
> *So it is the nightingale's right to gaze upon you.*
> *To sing of your saffron-red lips,*
> *To sing of the brow that never darkens,*
> *To sing of your eyebrows embroidered like cords,*
> *The eyelids like arrows, eyes full of light" [Kaleshi, 2013].*

The scholar Osman Myderrizi (p. 189) notes that Nezimi's poetry, *"Si bandill i djegur"* ("Like a Burned Torch"), is among the oldest erotic songs and one of the most beautiful compositions written in the Albanian language, created during years when secular themes were considered forbidden for communities of Catholic and Orthodox affiliation. Marin Sirdani (1885-1962) regarded these poems as "immoral" and unsuitable for Albanian popular culture *[Sirdani, 1922]*.

Hasan Zyko Kamberi was among the first creators in the Albanian language to address issues of both domestic and foreign politics in the early period of the National Awakening *[Sota, 2012]*. He had a religious education in a madrasa and, naturally, wrote primarily in the Arabic script. However, his activity was not limited to religious subjects; it also encompassed secular and social themes, making him an important figure in the development of Albanian literature.

However, since Albanians did not have a long-standing tradition of writing, very few realized that their language could and should be written. A small minority understood that the alphabet was the way through which a people "remember" and live on in history. With just a set of letters (an alphabet) and some punctuation marks, they realized they could express any thought they wanted - good or bad, short or long, wise or foolish, angelic or devilish. They understood that writing was humanity's most ingenious invention, the fundamental tool for creating and transmitting culture.

But with which letters would Albanians write their language? The entire region of Epirus was under the strong influence of Greek culture. Some Albanian-speaking villages in the south, from an external perspective, appeared highly Hellenized. Nevertheless, there were also purely Albanian villages that did not know Greek but used the Greek alphabet to write in Albanian the correspondence they exchanged among themselves. This phenomenon shows that the use of an alphabet was not always indicative of the spoken language, but often a practical tool for recording Albanian in writing *[Clayer, 2009]*.

In 1827, the four Gospels were published in Albanian, but written with Greek letters in Corfu. **Anastas Pykaios**, in the first issue of his newspaper on January 6, 1860, presented Albanian as a very old dialect of Greek and claimed that Albanians should not have had any language other than Greek. He had devised an *alphabet for Albanian*, composed of standard Greek letters along with some reversed letters *[Ibid]*. The use of Albanian, which he considered an "undeveloped language", was intended to serve the Hellenization of the Albanian people.

This was also the reason why some Muslims, who wrote Albanian using the Ottoman script, perceived a change in the alphabet as a change of religion. They believed that using Latin letters would lead to abandoning Islam. In Tirana, it was rumored that in the city's patriotic club, not only was the call to prayer recited in Albanian, but the Yasin was read by a priest, and the Amen was performed by making the sign of the cross. The Albanian language and its non-Arabic alphabet were considered factors that "made one a kafir," potentially prompting people to abandon the Qur'an and, according to the fears of the time, even leading to the severing of family ties between brothers and sisters *[Ibid]*.

Konica notes that the Orthodox Albanians were afraid that the creation of any new society might harm the interests of Greece and Russia, and for this reason, they were more active in establishing the society themselves and, in this way, also influencing the alphabet. Two factions with similar positions had formed: the Slavophile faction, led by the Albanian Herakli Dino, and the Greek faction, headed by another wealthy Albanian, Gavril Pema. Both factions claimed Albania under Orthodox rule *[Konica, 2007]*.

Around 1890, in Bucharest, **Koçof**[1] from Korça organized the Slavophile faction among Albanians and proposed that *they write the Albanian language using the Cyrillic alphabet [Konica, 2007]*. He reports that whenever news circulated about the opening of an Albanian school, rumors spread claiming it was a trap set by the *"Turkish"* Albanians. Konica cites, for example, the year 1888, when the millionaire Aramidh Lakshe had left a testament of half a million francs for Albanian schools. Distorted claims slandered that he had stipulated: "*If we want to become Muslims*", and his testament was rendered invalid *[Ibid]*.

They also labeled Faik Konica's magazine Albania as "propaganda of tyranny," linking it to the fact that its publisher was Muslim. **Demetrio Camarda** (1821-1882), an Arbëresh priest, was persistent in fostering connections between Albanians and Latins; he did not exclude the use of the Greek alphabet and also supported political projects aiming at the unification of Greeks and Albanians. Despite these ideas and foreign influences, it seemed that the Albanians themselves were eager to create an independent alphabet.

An early attempt in this direction, although still little known, is evidenced by the manuscript of **Papa Totasi**, whose alphabet retained traces of Slavo-Greek writing. Shuteriqi believes that this manuscript belongs to the period of the Balkan heresies known as "Bogomil", but very little can be said about it and its direct influence *[Shuteriqi, 2005]*.

Later, we can mention the Orthodox cleric **Gregorin of Durrës - a Voskopojar** (1700-1772), who translated the Bible in 1768 using an alphabet he himself had invented; this is the only known text

[1] *Around 1890, in Bucharest, there is no reliable historical evidence that an Albanian named "Koçof" organized a Slavic party or proposed the use of the Cyrillic alphabet for the Albanian language. The debate on the Albanian alphabet within Albanian émigré communities focused primarily on the Latin alphabet, while proposals for the adoption of Cyrillic were not supported by Albanian National Revival figures. A documented historical figure associated with Albanian activities in Bucharest and with alphabet-related issues is Jani Vreto, a well-known National Revivalist from Korça, who took part in efforts to standardize the Albanian alphabet and to promote the use of the Latin script [Author's note].*

written in this alphabet *[Sota, 2012]*. Subsequently, **Teodor Haxhifilipi**, known as **Dhaskal Todhri** (1730-1805), created an alphabet with 53 letters, which was used for writing Albanian in Central Albania during the 18th and 19th centuries *[Ibid]*.

Following him comes the alphabet of **Jani Vellara** (1771-1823), consisting of 30 Latin letters and several small "signs" from Greek. Vellara was the author of an 86-page manuscript containing grammatical notes and phrases in both Modern Greek and Albanian (1801) *[Ibid]*. Elsie also mentions the alphabets of Vezo Beu from Gjirokastër and Konstantin (Kostë) of Berat, around 1798 *[Elsie, 1997]*.

Another important attempt was that of **Naum Veqilharxhi** (1797-1846), an idealist figure of the Albanian Nationalist Movement, who devoted himself to creating an original Albanian alphabet with the hope of uniting Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim communities on this issue. He published the first eight pages of Albanian orthography in 1844, titled *"Fort i shkurtër e i përdorshëm ëvetar shqip, për çdo siciellë që do të mësojë të kënduarit e të shkruarit bukur shqip"*, expanding this publication to 48 pages in the following year, 1845. Both editions were printed in Bucharest *[Sota, 2023]*.

3. Cultural, Educational, and Political Contribution of the Efforts for the Alphabet

At the end of the 1850s, in Istanbul, a society was formed to raise funds for Albanian books and schools, which was revived in 1864 by Hasan Tahsini, Ismail Qemali, Pashko Vasa, and Kristoforidhi. Tahsini devised an original alphabet to reflect the personality of the people and to strengthen the patriotic feelings of the Albanians. The alphabet was incorporated into the *"Xhemijeti Ilmije-i Arnavudije"* in 1879 and was supported by prominent figures in education and culture *[Ibid]*.

In 1864, the renowned cleric **Hasan Tahsini** (1811-1881), in collaboration with **Ismail Qemali** (1844-1919), **Pashko Vasa** (1825-1892), and **Kostandin Kristoforidhi** (1826-1895), took the initiative to revive this national society with the aim of securing financial resources *[Ibid]*. Hasan **Tahsini Tahsini**, the first rector of Istanbul University and the first lecturer of social and natural sciences there, devised an *original alphabet*, although it was based on the roots of various ancient alphabets. He intended for the alphabet to distinguish the Albanian language from other languages, reflecting the personality of his people and strengthening the cultural and patriotic sentiments of the Albanians.

Hasan Tahsini was a teacher of prominent figures of the time, such as Abdyl Frashëri, Naim Frashëri, Sami Frashëri, Vaso Pasha, Jani Vreto, Ismail Qemali, and Daniel Oparaku. He devised the alphabet in 1874, and it was incorporated into the group "Xhemijeti Ilmije-i Arnavudije" [The Society of Albanian Scholars or the Albanian Scientific Assembly] in 1879 *[Osmani, 1999]*. The scholar Tomor Osmani highlights Tahsini's contribution not only in creating the alphabet but also through his active participation in the meetings held between 1867 and 1879 in Istanbul regarding this matter.

Moreover, the French consul in Janina, August Dozon, informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Hasan Tahsini and Kostandin Kristoforidhi were working to develop the Albanian language to the level of a written language and to spread education in the mother tongue, thereby establishing a "barrier against Hellenization".

Being himself a cleric, **Kostandin Kristoforidhi** believed that the writing of the Albanian language should conform to both phonetic and morphological principles. For this reason, he emphasized: *"Our language cannot be written using the Arabic alphabet. The most convincing proof is the fact that those among the Albanians who have learned the Arabic language, when writing to their children, use modern Greek, which they do not know well and have learned only by associating with Greeks… yet even the Greek letters are insufficient to represent all the sounds of our language" [Sota, 2023]*.

His greatest concern was that the issue of the alphabet should not be politicized and that a single alphabet should be established for all Albanians, so as not to hinder their unity.

Such efforts to develop the Albanian language were unwelcome to the Orthodox Patriarch, who in 1866 threatened anyone who read or wrote in Albanian, regardless of the alphabet they used *[Wolf, 1967]*. He looked with hatred at the two schools in Korçë, one for girls and one for boys, where Albanian was openly spoken, and students were encouraged to write and speak their mother tongue

[Ibid].

By 1877, **Sami Bey Frashëri** obtained a firman authorizing the opening of another Albanian school in Korçë, financed by the "Drita" association *[Sota, 2014]*. The association published its statutes two years later (1879) along with a reading book using a self-adapted alphabet. All these publications were authorized by the Ottoman authorities. The Sultan's firman also allowed the publication of the newspaper "Drita" in Albanian, of which twelve issues were released *[Konica, 2007]*.

In the same year (1879), in Athens, the society "Voice of Albania" was established by **Anastas Kullurioti**, who began publishing a *newspaper* of the same name in both Albanian and Greek (1879-1880). Kullurioti was poisoned by the Greek Church *[Ibid]*.

A modest effort in this direction had also been made by **Daut Borici** (1825-1896), who published a *primer* in Istanbul in 1861 and 1869, using Arab-Turkish letters along with his own original creations *[Boriçi, 1861]*, following the path previously opened by Naum and Kristoforidhi. His primer contained 37 letters: 28 from the Arabic alphabet, 2 from Ottoman Turkish, and 7 newly created by the author to meet the needs of the Albanian language. On page 32 of the primer, he wrote: "xen me shkrue shqip" ("I want to write in Albanian"), which was the main goal of his work. Borici is also the author of an *"Albanian Grammar"* and a *"Turkish-Albanian Dictionary" [Kastrati, 1954]*.

The next effort was made by **Hafiz Ali Ulqinaku** (1853-1913) *[Ulqinaku, H A. (circa 1900)]*, who created a special primer. Although it was designed using the Arabic alphabet in line with the logic of the time, this primer holds unique patriotic, scientific, linguistic, and didactic value. Its purpose is expressed in the verses of the author's Mevlud:

> *"In the Albanian language, my aim is to teach,*
> *So that my brothers may benefit, even if just a little" [Ibid].*

The primer, which remained only in manuscript form for many years, contains a total of 15 sheets and 26 pages, and was first published in a monographic study in 2005. Its author also compiled three Albanian-Turkish dictionaries, totaling 1,334 pages, which hold significant lexicological, lexicographical, dialectological, and historical value for the Albanian language.

Unlike his two predecessors, **Said Najdeni** (1864-1903) compiled an alphabet based on the Latin script, which he named *"Primer of the Albanian Language - in Gheg Dialect"*, and published it in Sofia in 1900 *[Najdeni, 1900]*. He developed this alphabet using the Istanbul alphabet as a foundation, with several modifications to adapt it to the Gheg dialect. The alphabet consisted of 36 letters, arranged vertically and horizontally, combined with letters from the French and Greek alphabets, and was accompanied by grammar exercises and reading passages. Said Najdeni belonged to the group of clerics who believed that the Latin alphabet was the most suitable for writing the Albanian language.

The same perspective was followed by **Hafiz Ali Korça** (1874-1957), who, in addition to his extensive activity encompassing over 6,733 printed pages, also published a primer constructed according to the phonetic method and divided into instructional units. The primer included several reading passages and Albanian proverbs, comprised a total of 48 pages, and served for several years as a tool for teaching reading and writing in Albanian to the general population *[Korça, H. A. (1910]*.

The *Albanian primer* with Arabic letters by **Rexhep Tetova (Hoxhë Voka)** (1847-1917) *[Voka, 1911]*, although lacking practical usability and without widespread circulation, does not diminish its historical value. His efforts to create new letters to represent the Albanian sounds absent in the Arabic alphabet are considerable. He titled the primer *"Abeja shqip"* and published it in 1910 in Istanbul, with a print run of 10,000 copies. The primer consisted of 20 pages and was dedicated: *"To the enlightened Albanian people, so that children may write and read in their mother tongue..." [Tetova, V. (Hoxhë Voka), 1910]*.

A year later, **Rexhep Voka** also published the *"Elementary Albanian Grammar"* and a religious educational text, *"Ilmihal i hollësishëm shqip"*.

For the effort to write Albanian using the Arabic alphabet, the Mufti of Monastir, **Rexhep Xhudibin Nureddin**, originally from Tetova, created a special alphabet with 44 letters and published a 22-page book entitled *"Education and Learning of the Albanian Language"* [2nd edition, 1911].

Abdulhaqim Hiqmet Dogani (1880-1955), a professor of Albanian at the Normal School (Darul-

mu'allimin) in Skopje and author of 16 school textbooks written in Turkish, also compiled an *"Albanian Primer with Arabic Letters"* (*"Amavutça elifba - arap harflariyla"*), and in 1946 he created another Albanian primer *[Dogani, A. H. (1946]*.

It should be emphasized that before the Congress of Manastir, when Albanians did not yet have a unified alphabet, some of these clerics wrote Albanian by creating their own alphabets based on the Arabic script. Other priests used the Greek alphabet (Orthodox) or the Latin alphabet (Catholic). The mere fact that they wrote in Albanian demonstrates that their language could and should be written, and that Albanians were beginning to understand the importance of having a native alphabet.

4. Conclusions

The study of the history of writing in the Albanian language up to the Congress of Manastir highlights a long and complex journey, in which various religious, cultural, and political factors influenced the development of the Albanian alphabet and writing system. For an extended period, Albanians faced the absence of a standardized written language and the control of foreign powers, which dominated education and literature according to their religious and political interests. Early efforts to write in Albanian - whether using the Latin, Arabic, Greek, or Cyrillic alphabets - demonstrate a clear desire to preserve national identity and to affirm the Albanian language as a means of communication, education, and cultural expression.

Early Albanian schools and texts, especially those with a religious character, were limited instruments but played an important role in the development of national consciousness. The first primers and dictionaries, compiled by authors such as Dhaskal Todhri, Jani Vellara, Daut Borici, Rexhep Voka, Said Najdeni, and Hafiz Ali Korça, demonstrate that even within a difficult historical context, Albanians were willing to find solutions to represent the sounds of the Albanian language and to give readers the opportunity to learn their mother tongue. Most of these efforts were motivated by patriotic and educational aims, seeking not only to preserve the language but also to build a unified cultural and national identity.

A particular value of these works lies in the fact that they mark the beginnings of an organized effort to create a common alphabet, which later became a reality at the Congress of Manastir. The creators of the alphabet were not only figures from literature and science but also religious leaders and intellectuals who sought to find a compromise solution for all religious communities while preserving national unity. This process highlighted the importance of the alphabet as a tool not only for communication but also as a means of safeguarding against external influences and as an instrument of cultural and educational emancipation.

The study also clearly shows that the early efforts to develop an alphabet were not merely a technical matter, but a complex process with religious, political, and cultural dimensions. Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim Albanians faced different challenges as they sought to preserve the Albanian language within the possible constraints. Many were hesitant about changing the alphabet, seeing it as a symbol of religious or political division, while others viewed it as a tool to affirm national identity and unity. For this reason, every effort to write in Albanian, regardless of the alphabet used, holds a special historical and cultural significance.

In conclusion, the history of the Albanian alphabet up to the Congress of Manastir demonstrates that language is a fundamental component of national identity, and that early efforts in writing are an integral part of the movement for the emancipation and unification of the Albanian people. From Dhaskal Todhri to Naum Veqilharxhi, from Daut Borici to Rexhep Voka and Hafiz Ali Korça, these intellectuals and clerics paved the way for the development of a written language, laying the foundation for its standardization and its affirmation in Albanian education and culture. The unified alphabet established at the Congress of Manastir is the result of a long-standing tradition of writing in Albanian and a testament to the dedication of previous generations to preserve and promote the Albanian language, culture, and national identity.

This long and complex process is not only the history of the language but also the history of national consciousness and the efforts for cultural unity, which continue to inspire Albanians in

preserving and developing their language and literature. Through this journey, it becomes clear that the alphabet is not merely a set of letters, but a symbol of identity and of a people's resilience in safeguarding their language, culture, and historical heritage.

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