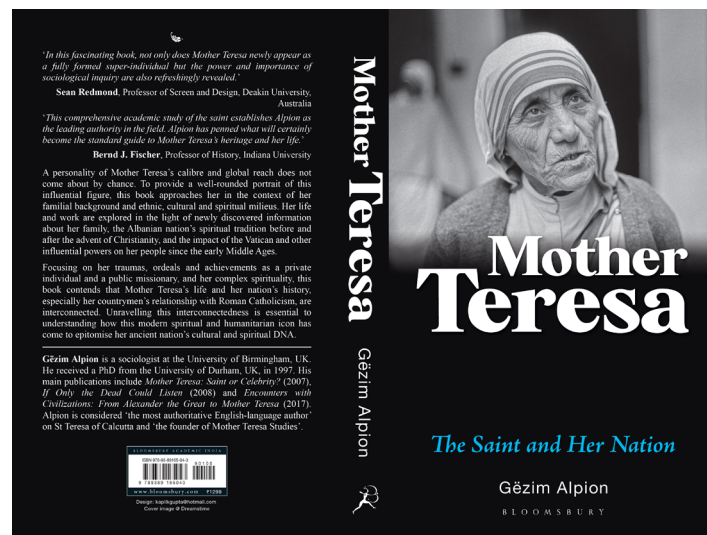


Excerpt

Gëzim Alphon

Cinema and National Identity: How Yugoslav film studios manipulated Mother Teresa's ethno-religious identity in an Italian biopic



This is an excerpt from Gëzim Alphon's latest book *Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation*, published on 31 July 2020 by Bloomsbury Academic in New Delhi, London, Oxford, New York and Sydney; 320 pages, ISBN: HB: 978-93-89165-04-3; eBook: 978-93-89165-06-7;

www.bloomsbury.com/9789389165050/.

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Albanian-born Mother Teresa (née Gonxhe Agnes Bojaxhiu) made the following statement to the world media in Oslo whilst collecting the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1979:

By blood and origin, I am all

Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the heart of Jesus.¹

These words encapsulated clearly the phenomenon known as Mother Teresa. It was a statement that succinctly and unequivocally depicted her identity as an individual, the universal nature of her ministry and the ultimate loyalty that sustained her existence.

Notwithstanding Mother Teresa's clarity about her own identity, a number of circles in and outside the Balkans have made efforts to deny her Albanian ancestry altogether and present her as a Serb, Croat,

¹ Eileen Egan. 1986. Such a Vision of the Street: Mother Teresa – The Spirit and the Work. New York: Doubleday, p. 413.

Macedonian Slav, Vlach, or an Italian.

The main goals of such attempts are twofold. First, they aim to undermine the impact of the familial, ethnic, cultural, and spiritual milieus on Mother Teresa. Secondly, they are part of sustained efforts waged in the Balkans and beyond to erase Albanians' ancient Christian legacy and present them as 'newcomers' to the region.

Such attempts began in the 1960s and 1970s when Mother Teresa international standing as a religious personality and a great humanitarian was growing worldwide.² They intensified after she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace and are ongoing.³

Yugoslav authorities were especially keen to keep the nun's ethnicity under wraps. The article focuses on the attempts made by the Yugoslav film industry to misrepresent

and distort Mother Teresa's ethno-religious roots in the wake of the Nobel prize. This is illustrated by the intriguing circumstances that led to the production of Brunello Rondi's 1982 Italian biopic *La Voce: Infanzia e giovinezza di Madre Teresa di Calcutta*, 'The Voice: The Childhood and Youth of Mother Teresa of Calcutta'. This is the first time that the Yugoslav intervention in the film's production is made public.

Towards the end of 1979, *Radiotelevisione italiana*, RAI, Italy's national public broadcasting company, approached Chiara Film Studio regarding the production of a film about Mother Teresa's early years in Skopje. The project was the brainchild of Albanian-born Gjon Kolndrekaj from Kosova who, at that time, was a television director with the broadcaster.⁴ This was the first serious attempt to record the story of Mother Teresa's family and her early years in Skopje.

Kolndrekaj, who knew Mother Teresa personally and was in contact with her from 1977 to 1996, co-wrote the script with Rondi and Tullio Pinelli, following interviews with her and her brother, Lazar, during a number of meetings in Rome. Kolndrekaj also consulted a number of scholars, clerics, and artists from Kosova, Macedonia and beyond, who knew Mother Teresa and her family in Skopje, or were in contact with her during the time the

Bloomsbury Academic.

⁴ Gëzim Alpiion exchanged views with Gjon Kolndrekaj about this film and other aspects of Mother Teresa's life and work in meetings in Rome, and through telephone conversations and emails exchanged during the 2008-2020 period

² For information on Mother Teresa's growing international fame from the 1960s onwards see Gëzim Alpiion. 2006. 'Media and celebrity culture: subjectivist, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to Mother Teresa's celebrity status'. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 20 (4): 541-557; and Gëzim Alpiion. 2020. 'Why are modern spiritual icons absent in celebrity studies? The role of intermediaries in enhancing Mother Teresa's advocacy in India and Australia prior to the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize'. *Celebrity Studies*, 11 (2): 221-236.

³ For information on efforts to deny Mother Teresa's Albanian ethnicity and present her as a Serb, Croat, Slav Macedonian Slav, Vlach, and an Italian see Gëzim Alpiion. 2004. 'Media, ethnicity and patriotism: The Balkans 'unholy war' for the appropriation of Mother Teresa'. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans (now Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies)*, 6 (3): 227-243; Gëzim Alpiion. 2007. *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* London and New York: Routledge; and Gëzim Alpiion. 2020. *Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation*. New Delhi, London, Oxford, New York, and Sydney:

project was taking shape.⁵

Together with Rondi and the Italian producer Oscar Brazzi, Kolndrekaj visited a number of places in Kosova and Macedonia in November and December 1979 to identify the locations for the film. By then, he had also put together a renowned international cast. Mother Teresa's role as a child was offered to the Italian actress Liliana Tari, while her young mother's part went to Marisa Belli, also an Italian. Two-time Academy Award-winner English actress Glenda Jackson was happy to be cast as Mother Teresa in a number of scenes showing the nun at work in India up until the award of the 1979 Nobel Prize. Two other world-famous stars, Greek-born Irene Papas and Albanian-born Bekim Fehmiu, agreed to play Gonxhe's parents Nikollë and Drane who is also known as Roza. Stelvio Cipriani was approached to compose the music.

With everything in place, it was agreed that filming would commence in December 1980.⁶ The start date was proposed by Kolndrekaj who was keen to first complete *Happy Circus*, a 60-part programme he was producing at that time for Rai Uno, RAI's flagship television channel.

The Italian team started shooting without Kolndrekaj in November 1980. The

main reason for this was the deal Brazzi had secured for the project with three Yugoslav film studios: Avala Film in Serbia, Croatian Jadran Film, and the Skopje-based Vardar Film.

The support offered by the Yugoslav film industry for the Mother Teresa film was too good to turn down. Its downside was that the deal came with a number of strings attached.

Brazzi agreed readily to the conditions set out by the Yugoslavs. He did not inform Kolndrekaj of the deal when the shooting began or during the editing process.

When the project was finally completed, Kolndrekaj arranged in Rome a private viewing of the final film with some of the people who had advised him during the script-writing stage. It was by then that he became aware, for the first time, of the full extent of the changes requested by the Yugoslav backers.

Such alterations had affected significantly the original arrangements regarding locations, costumes, and the plot. In one scene, for instance, little Gonxhe is shown to be in a state of deep concentration in a house of worship. At the recommendation of the Serbian and Macedonian Slav consultants, Rondi shot the scene not in a Roman Catholic Church, as originally planned, but at the Eastern Orthodox Monastery of Saint Naum in Ohrid, south-west Macedonia. The new setting was chosen to present Mother Teresa as an Orthodox and not a Roman Catholic.

5 These are some of the people Gjon Kolndrekaj consulted in Kosova, Macedonia and Italy as he was writing the script of the film *La Voce*: Lorenc Antoni, Anton Çeta, Father Lush Gjergji, Father Gjergj Gjergji, Father Eleuterio Francesco Fortino and Albert Akshija.

6 Rilindja. 1980. 'Xhirohet filmi mbi Nënë Tereze'. Rilindja, Prishtinë, 25 October.

The second major deviation from the original plan concerned the outfits of the characters. The members of the Bojaxhiu family were dressed in Serbian and Slavic Macedonian folk costumes. This misrepresentation was introduced to present Mother Teresa and her family and relatives not as ethnic Albanians but as Slavs.

The third important alteration related to the Bojaxhius' attitude towards the Albanian national cause. Contrary to what was written before the shooting had started, the film claims that Gonxhe's ancestors had been fighting only against the Ottomans. To 'substantiate' this claim, Rondi had added another character, Mother Teresa's paternal grandfather Lazër Bojaxhiu. The patriarch was portrayed as a wealthy man who was keen to finance the resistance against the Ottomans.

Like their fellow Albanians in Kosova, the Bojaxhius had for generations opposed the Ottoman rule. However, by the time Gonxhe and her elder siblings were born, her father, Nikollë – along with other countrymen in the Vilayet of Kosova, irrespective of their religious affiliations – was equally opposed to the atrocities perpetrated by the Slavs against the Albanian population and their plans to annex Albanian territories.

Unhappy with the changes to the original script, Kolndrekaj informed Brazzi and Rai Uno that he no longer wished to be associated with the project. He was not prepared to break the promise he had given to Mother Teresa that the biopic would be true

to life.



Kolndrekaj's principled attitude was supported also by the people who had advised him during the script-writing stage. They all agreed that the film amounted to a deliberate attempt on the part of the Yugoslav circles, that had supported the project, to misrepresent Mother Teresa's ethno-religious roots and the nature of the Bojaxhius' attachment to the Albanian national cause. Under these circumstances, Kolndrekaj and his team concluded that the finished film was not fit to be shown on television, not only in Italy and Yugoslavia but also in any other country, as it amounted to an intentional perversion of truth.

Kolndrekaj conveyed his concerns about the film to Mother Teresa without delay. The nun told him not to worry about it, adding: 'God will do something about this injustice'.

The influential nun apparently did not

leave this issue only in the hands of God. As a result of her intervention the film was not screened, as planned, on Rai Uno in March 1981. Nor was it shown by any other television station in Italy, Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia for as long as she was alive.

This ‘embargo’ was broken for the first time by Rai Uno only on 6 September 1997 at 3.40 am. By then, Mother Teresa had been dead for about eight hours.

Dr. Gëzim Alpion is a sociologist at the University of Birmingham, UK. He received a PhD from the University of Durham, UK, in 1997. His main publications include Mother Teresa Saint or Celebrity? (Routledge 2007), If Only the Dead Could Listen (Globic Press 2008), Encounters with Civilizations: From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa (Routledge 2017), and Mother Teresa: The Saint and Her Nation (Bloomsbury Academic 2020). Alpion is considered the ‘most authoritative English-language author’ on St Teresa of Calcutta and ‘the founder of Mother Teresa Studies’.