

## When the Dead Conspire: Albanian Necropolitics

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**Abstract:** Review of “*Një varrim për çdo regjim: përdorimi politik i trupit të vdekur në Shqipëri*”, K. Këlliçi. *Botime Berk* 2023

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Among Albanians, the dead have never been merely absent—they are companions, interlocutors, and, at times, instruments in the designs of the living. In *Doruntine* (Kush e solli Doruntinën), Ismail Kadare evokes the necrophilic love between a sister and brother, a devotion so profound that the dead cannot be left behind. Instead, they become co-conspirators in the vision of the living, enlisted to carry messages, fulfill promises, and sustain the moral order.

This sisterly love of the dead, reimagined as engineered political intimacy, is the focus of Klejdi Këlliçi’s *Një varrim për çdo regjim: përdorimi politik i trupit të vdekur në Shqipëri* (Botime Berk, 2023), reviewed in this article. Këlliçi traces how Albanian regimes—particularly under communism—resurrected certain dead, reburied others, and even symbolically “buried” the living, all to rearrange the symbolic order. In this choreography of corpses, the dead are not simply remembered but repurposed, dispatched on missions they may never have imagined in life. Through such manipulations, the state legitimates itself, builds or destroys myths, and sometimes loses track of whether the burial produced the myth or the myth required the burial.

Seen from this angle, the treatment of the dead is never neutral; it is an entry point into a wider conspiracy in which the dead themselves appear to participate. Across history, they have drawn the living into elaborate rituals, disputes, and commemorations, shaping political and social orders long after their final breath. (Christ 2025) Their “agency” lies in compelling the living—through burial practices, memorials, or political spectacles—to keep the dead at the center of the community’s moral and political imagination.

The conspiracy of the dead operates through space, ritual, and narrative. Burial grounds become territories to defend or contest; epitaphs, manifestos; missing bodies, unhealed wounds. Wars, genocides, and political upheavals swell their numbers and magnify their influence. The denial of burial, the destruction of graves, or the ceremonial resurrection of remains are all moves in this game, forcing the living to renegotiate identity, legitimacy, and belonging.

Religious and cultural geographies serve as the dead’s staging grounds. Cemeteries, shrines, and sacred landscapes are arenas where political authority, communal cohesion, and resistance are played out. Minority groups defending their burial rites often challenge the dominant order, while folk traditions and local saints create alternative necrogeographies beyond state control.

Through the politics of remembrance, the dead exert their greatest influence. Commemorations, monuments, and erasures manipulate public memory, determining which deaths inspire loyalty or revolt, and which dissolve into silence. In doing so, they secure a permanent role in political and cultural life.

Këlliçi’s central thesis is that—from Albania’s politicized reburials to the

global history of contested graves—the dead emerge not as passive relics but as active agents in an enduring pact. They infiltrate political systems, occupy public space, and dictate narratives—not to overthrow the living order entirely, but to ensure it remains, in part, theirs. The dead, it seems, will not let go until the living have joined them, completing the cycle and renewing the conspiracy.

The author's strength lies in his deep empirical knowledge of Albania. Despite a tendency to catalogue concepts from the literature without fully integrating them into his analytical treatment of Albanian political events, he avoids the common pitfall of stretching a narrow, locally bound case into an ill-fitting global theory.

There is, however, a slight detour into Carl Schmitt's political theory—perhaps mediated through secondary sources—that adds little beyond signaling familiarity. More convincingly, Këlliçi addresses the dehumanization of the dead through the denial of proper burial, fixed grave, or ceremonial reintegration into the community, as with purge victims among the communist elite. Conversely, the retrieval and ceremonious reburial of figures such as Sami Frashëri from Turkey or Ismail Qemali from Italy can be read as exercises of sovereignty, bolstering the regime's legitimacy—much like the Eichmann trial in Israel. In appropriating the dead, the state extends its monopolous, sometimes violent, authority beyond the living.

In Frashëri's case, the state also annexes his intellectual legacy, nationalizing his utopian vision for Albania's future (Albania, how it was, and how it was to become). Like a zombie empire, the regime conspires with the dead to impose their vision on the living.

Këlliçi works his empirical case with three types of corpses: victims of political violence, heroic nation-builders, and foreign soldiers. This typology implicitly echoes Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction, though he leaves the theoretical implications unexplored in favor of empirical narrative.

Këlliçi also invokes Kosovo-Serbia relations, where negotiations remain hostage to demands for the return of war dead. Here, the dead serve as instruments of historical revision, vehicles for reclaiming memory, or magnets for public attention to events that shape collective narratives (p. 9). Yet this case seems less connected to the legacy of those dead in the present government than to the mechanics of historical revisionism.

He notes the "materiality" of the dead—the bones and remains functioning like Catholic relics in the construction of national myths. For Këlliçi, they are both symbolic and control mechanisms: the "living dead" venerated or cursed posthumously can be mobilized to influence communities, as when monuments are erected or removed. The status of the "war hero" under communism—often tied to tangible benefits for surviving relatives—illustrates how legitimacy rooted in the antifascist war eroded after regime change.

The corpse, in his view, carries multiple functions, even if he does not lay them out structurally. They can be summarized as follows: (1) a source of political debate and legitimacy; (2) forensic evidence of past and potential future crimes; (3) a form of family property; (4) a body subject to hierarchical valuation (some remain 'more dead' than others); (5) a historiographical artefact inscribed with victimhood or guilt; (6) a focal point for ceremonies and political rituals, of inclusion and exclusion; (7) a site of tension, as in the

contested legacy of Azem Hajdari; and (8) a geographical or temporal marker (contested biographies) or geopolitical sign post (contested territories) for state sovereignty. In addition, (9) the dead have an exchange value—they can be traded, returned, or leveraged in political deals between former enemies or prospective allies.

To conclude the book's contribution is to show how the dead, far from being mere objects of memory, are mobilized as political resources in Albania's contested history. Këlliçi's work invites further inquiry into how necropolitics shapes not only national narratives but also everyday practices of belonging, exclusion, and power. In tracing the journeys of the politicized dead, he reveals the enduring conspiracies of the dead.

## References

- Christ, Martin (May 2025). *Necrogeographies of the Marginal Dead*. Conference report in \*H-Soz-Kult\*. Conference held in Erfurt, Germany, 15–16 May 2025. URL: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-156468>.