

*Lambrini Styliou  
University of Thessaly*

**“The Albanian migrant family: negotiating gendered ideologies and practices”**

This paper draws on findings of the research project “GAME” (Gendered aspects of migration in Southeast Europe: Integration, Labor and Transnational Communication), which is based at the Department of History, Archaeology and Social Anthropology of the University of Thessaly<sup>1</sup>. (I will first give a brief account of the scope of this project and then will move on to the more specific concerns of this paper.) This project investigates the gender dimensions of contemporary forms of population movement within the Balkan region, specifically from Albania and Bulgaria to Greece. During the last two decades, the geopolitical space of Southeast Europe has been redefined due to political developments of the post-communist period and contemporary political, economic and cultural exchanges. The phenomenon of mobility of persons and the emergence of new social relationships as well as new forms of political subjectivity and communication play a central role in this transition. Drawing on oral testimonies, this project aims at exploring the historicity of cultural inscriptions of mobility in Greece, the emergence of new mediated forms of communication, and the gender dimensions of migration.

Our focus is on migrant men and women from Albania and Bulgaria who live and work in Volos, a city in north-eastern Greece, where the University of Thessaly is based. These two migrant groups<sup>2</sup> were chosen for two basic reasons: first according to statistics they constitute the two largest migrant communities in Greece, as well as in the prefecture of Magnesia where the city of Volos is situated. Secondly, and most important, these groups have very different family formations and gender ideologies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Pythagoras” – Research Action: Gendered Aspects of Migration in Southeast Europe, EPEAEK II.

<sup>2</sup> Every time I use the term group it is because of lack of any other relevant term that refers sufficiently to the collectivity of Albanians or Bulgarian migrants. I am totally aware of the weaknesses of such a term and by no means do I imply that there is an undifferentiated community with common and general characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> In the first case we have migrant men and women from Albania with men predominating in number. However, especially after 1997, there was an important increase of family reunifications. In the second case of Bulgarian migrants, women predominate. They usually migrate alone, living their families back in the country of origin. Some of them are already divorced, or in the process of doing so. However, going further in this analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

The project is based on life-stories of both men and women in the age groups of 18-30, 30-55 years old and a few taken from men and women above 55.

In this paper I will focus on migrants of Albanian origin and use interviews with men and women in the 30-55 year-old bracket as well from the 18-30 year-old group in order to compare phenomena across generations. Aside from interviews, I also use material that has been gathered through informal contacts and discussions with migrants of Albanian origin, as well as during a brief period of fieldwork in Albania in the hometowns of some of the people with whom we had conducted interviews<sup>4</sup>.

After analysing the interviews, one of the issues which seems central to the migration experience, but which has not been adequately addressed in studies that treat migrants as monads—or, at best, dyads, is the relationship between generations within extended families.

A great deal of the literature on gender and migration, especially some years ago, focused on the husband-wife relationship and on the possible changes that the migration experience might bring for the roles and gender identity of the woman (Phizacklea, 1983, Simon & Brettel, 1986, Pedraza, 1991, etc.). Many scholars have argued about whether women increase or lose power and status depending on the redistribution of household tasks among the couple, the participation of the wife in the decision-making or her freedom to work and have a social life and role other than wife or mother. However, when speaking of gender issues in relation to the migration household, I believe it is important to move beyond the husband-wife relationship. What gender ideologies and practices are being negotiated and contested in the new place of residence through the relationship with the children, the ideologies that are modeled for them, and the roles they are expected to play?

Along with the increasing interest in migration studies in gender there has also been a growing awareness that the family is not just a heaven in a heartless world but a place where conflict and negotiation also take place. Especially in migration studies on the Greek context an approach like this is almost absent, as large-scale immigration is a relatively new phenomenon for Greece. Consequently issues related to second generation are starting now to attract academic attention. As Foner rightly supports the family should be “seen as a place where there is a dynamic interplay between structure, culture and agency – where creative culture-building takes place in

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<sup>4</sup> It has to be stressed that this research project is still in progress and so, this paper is not in any case conclusive work but rather a first attempt to read the material and form some relevant hypotheses.

the context of external social and economic forces as well as immigrants' premigration cultural frameworks." (Foner, 1997: 961) During the course of our research and through hearing the Albanian migrants' testimonies it became clear to me that it is within the family, and more particularly, in the relations between parents and children, that the negotiation with the host society is expressed. By this, I mean that certain values, attitudes and practices that are perceived by the older generation -- by the parents -- to resemble a Greek way of life and mentality are considered a threat for the children as well as for the whole family. Moreover, one might assume that it is exactly because of the existence of such a Greek context - highly perceived by the Albanian migrants as the more "modern" and "permissive" one - that there is a greater need especially for the older Albanian migrants to strengthen some of their ideologies, in an attempt to draw the dividing line between "Albanian" and "Greek" cultures.

Because of the long period of socialism in Albania and its totalitarian and isolationist politics, there are not many written texts that give us information about familial life and relationships of the postwar period. We know, though, that Hoxha, the leader of the communist party and ruler of Albania for almost 40 years, attempted to weaken the role of the family in favor of an empowered individual, directly dependent on a paternalist state. Through political and legal measures, he tried to restrict customs and practices that were related to a tradition, which perceived woman as an object in possession of a man, either her father or later her husband. Furthermore he supported and pushed for the participation of women in all levels of education, while on the same time their inclusion in the labor market was compulsory and general. However, we cannot be sure about the degree to which these changes in the public sphere influenced gender hierarchies within the household. Furthermore, as studies on socialism and post-socialism have shown there existed many paradoxes and contradictions in official discourses concerning gender roles and ideologies, as well as pervasive tensions between daily life and governmental images claiming to represent it. (Gal & Kligman, 2000). Migrants' testimonies about that period do not give us a clear picture, as many variables need to be examined, such as geographical location (south/ north)<sup>5</sup>, the urban/village context, and the educational and professional

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<sup>5</sup> This is a distinction of high relevance and one that Albanians themselves acknowledge as an important one. Generally speaking, people from the northern mountainous areas of Albania are thought to be more attached to tradition and to patriarchal structure while in the southern areas the pre-eminent self-definition is that of "progressive" and "modern". The Albanian partisan movement originated in the south, and many of the elders look back on their history as partisans.

background of the informant, to name just some. In my view the most interesting part is the way information about the past, which is remembered and narrated in the present, is being reconceptualized and interpreted in light of a person's current experience. According to Gal & Kligman it is in this context that we should interpret for example the idealization/mythologization of the family in the post-socialism era. They support that the family is seen as a site of "resistance" to communism, because it was the only thing not tainted by it. <sup>6</sup>

It is beyond my scope in this paper to examine whether we speak in terms of a "re-invention of tradition"<sup>7</sup> which has its origins in the pre-communist period and which comes in force again after the fall of the communism, or of a preservation of ideas and values, which were meaningful in the country of origin, and continue to be meaningful for [their life] in the new host country. The important element, however, is the existence of such norms, which are mainly projected onto the children's behavior and choices and which furthermore are highly gendered. What is even more important is the fact that because of a Greek social reality, which is perceived as a threat to a certain system of values and beliefs and from which the Albanian migrants try to differentiate, there is the need – or at least it is presented as such - to preserve and strengthen such practices, even they are being "loosened" in the country of origin.

I will proceed by giving some examples of what I mean when speaking of ideologies and values which migrant parents expect their children to adopt and which our informants relate to their Albanian descent, in an effort to differentiate themselves from the host society. Through the interviews with Albanian migrant men and women, but also in our fieldwork in Albania, we realized that marriage is seen as the most important event in a person's life cycle. Whether you are married or not is one of the first questions, if not the first, that one should expect to be asked when meeting a person from Albania for the first time. My female colleague and I had serious problems in explaining each time we were asked why we hadn't still gotten married although we were well on in years (26 years old!). Getting married is seen as your first priority, and furthermore it is considered a project that you should try to accomplish on the best terms. To give an example: Mailinta, an Albanian woman we

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<sup>6</sup> As if the family existed "separate" from the "public" when the state was – and is – so invested in shaping the family.

<sup>7</sup> A term that Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers (2001) uses to describe how after the fall of communism, in the north, "tradition" was used by locals as an ideological resource in negotiating control of scarce economic resources, such as land, and in determining social inclusion and exclusion. (Schwandner-Sievers, 2001)

met in southern Albanian city, was around 35 years old and hadn't "yet" married. The natives told us that she is too devoted to her work for the local Pentecostal church, a fact which detracts from what should be her primary pursuit: marriage. Furthermore they spoke negatively about her refusal of many proposals for arranged marriages. At the same time they greatly appreciated the social work she was doing for the local community and recognized she had offered a lot. Yet, the fact that the issue of marriage always came up in discussions reminded us that a woman is first and foremost socially recognized as a wife and a mother.

In Albania one common practice among men and women when they were seeking a partner to marry was - and maybe in a certain degree continues to be- match-making. When a young man or woman reaches an age that is thought suitable for marriage, friends and relatives help by arranging match-making with different candidates, so as the right mate might be found. Family does have an important say in the choice of their children's marriage partner. Among the Albanian migrants living and working in Volos, especially men, it is common that when they decide that they want to get married they go back to Albania for some days to search for a suitable wife. Otherwise, when they go back for summer vacation they usually find a number of arranged meetings with possible candidates already set up for them. The men's excuse for doing so is that first, there are not enough Albanian women in Greece, and second that women from their country, who they haven't migrated, are more suitable for their role as wives and mothers because they have been brought up in a certain social context, where woman should first and foremost mind for her family and her household and try to fulfill these duties on the best terms. As Illir, an Albanian man in the age of 45, explained to me, he wants his son to marry a girl from Albania because the girls in Greece,

*"To put it simple, a girl of those who live here (meaning in Greece) doesn't know how to cook. That's the first thing. The second one: she is used all the time to go out in one of the cafes at the sea-front. Where are we supposed to find the money for such kind of things? Are we rich? The second one: she wants the woman to have equal rights with the man. We are not yet used to these things."*

Most of the Albanian parents with whom we spoke expressed their wish for their children to marry a person of the same ethnic origin. This was especially intense in case of a son. More particularly, they agreed that a Greek woman is not suitable in terms of values and way of life to create a family. She works a lot and focuses on her

career, she doesn't care enough about household tasks but employs another woman to clean the house for her, and in the case of marriage is the one who makes the important decisions for the family and not her husband. Especially if we take into consideration that traditionally the woman is the one who is considered responsible for the cultural reproduction of the family, it is easy to understand the symbolic importance attributed to the future wife. Among the Albanian young men we spoke to, there were some who declared their intention to go against their parents' will and choose their future wife freely, regardless of origin, and some who agreed with and adopted their parents' opinion. However, we were surprised to find out that in the time between our first contact and interview and now, a large number of the men who had initially spoken out against the idea of match-making with an Albanian girl back home had finally agreed to do so and were either already married or in the process of being married. Children normally comply with their parents' wishes, even if they do not agree because of fear of repercussions and because they appreciate their parents' position.<sup>8</sup>

The same as with the son's future wife [there is a profound tension by] many Albanian migrants' families are profoundly invested in controlling their daughters' sexuality. Virginity is still highly esteemed, so it is felt that a girl should not have premarital sexual life or become involved in relationships with men that will not lead to marriage. In a Greek society full of temptations to "soil" the girl's "honour" and consequently the family's reputation, the family attempts to guard closely against any transgressive behaviour. The most important mechanism, by which the behavioural patterns are regulated, is social control. Due to the role of social networks in chain-migration, many persons of the same enlarged family or inhabitants of the same village or area have settled in Volos. Thus, a number of tightly knit communities have come into being within the city. Within these immigrant networks there is intense social control, which is made very effective because of the nature of the relationship between the Albanian family and the community. Gossip and shame are sanctions that are used by the family and by the community to ensure that girls do not cross the

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<sup>8</sup> Besides, for many boys, marriage does not mean liberation from their parents' authority. They continue to be dependent on the head of the family, even after they have children of their own, while many times they live all together in the same house. It is expected that they will contribute to the income of the enlarged family household. Very often they hand in their income to the household head (their father or mother) and are dependent on him for regular allowances and gifts. Consequently, the new member that enters the family has to be "approved" and meet the expectations of the whole family.

limits of accepted behaviour. They are not permitted to go out late while cousins and male relatives of the family are made responsible for safe-guarding the reputation of the family. Zana, a 17 year-old Albanian girl, who lives with her family in Volos, attends an evening school and works in the mornings. She is friends with girls from Albania but also with a Greek girl with whom she goes to school. She told me that her parents did not like her Greek friend when they met her.

*“They didn’t think well of her because one day she came home from school with my cousin, my cousin gave her a ride to my house with his motorcycle, and my mother didn’t like the fact that she rode with my cousin without knowing him. And so, she told me about my friend: does she ride any motorcycle to come to your house? Something like that. And she didn’t like that fact. My parents have some old principles, and that’s why they thought this way.”*

Another girl, Sofia, who is 21 years old, told me that her parents have an open mind and do not restrict her from doing certain things, like having relationships with boys, going out often and wearing what she wants. However, there are many relatives of her father who try to control her and tell her father he should be stricter with his daughters. Sofia also does not agree with the attitude of many Albanian families and she comments

*“I don’t agree with the way that Albanian women live. Mainly the young girls, because older women...ok, they have lived whatever they have lived...but for the young girls I don’t agree. ...Girls in particular are very...very timid and reserved persons and, you know, not to wear tight-fitting clothing and for people to see them... They don’t go out a lot so people do not speak bad about them and there are several other things that they think...that I don’t like them. I think they are ridiculous.”*

Apparently, neither Sofia nor her parents share the beliefs of many of their compatriots. We see that what for one group member represents an important value, may be experienced by another as an impediment. But, as Lindo rightly supports, in spite of the different assessments of a certain custom or institution, the normative element in a sense remains the point of reference. “To remain a point of reference in the group, this normative element should correspond to the preferences and expectations of a dominant part of the group” (Lindo, 1999: 85), even if you refer to it as a point of resistance.

As I already mentioned, the above ideologies and practices that parents try to impose to their children, sons and daughters, are used as a mode of differentiation

from Greek society. This is one of the few venues through which ethnically subordinated groups can represent and reconstruct Greeks as inferior and themselves as superior. In doing so, they invoke notions of cultural-ethnic descent. As Ilna notes *“My father has to know with whom I go out! To know that he is not fooling around with me, that, because as I said and before we have to go only with one man. Because this is the way WE are and we act this way.... Because as I said, this is the way we are and we have some PRINCIPLES let’s say.”*

This attitude imposes a deep emotional burden on the children, for whom out-marrying or sexual transgressions might signify not only gender and generational contestations, but larger betrayals of nation and culture.



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