

# GENDERED MEMORIES: FROM COMMUNIST PAST TO MIGRANT PRESENT

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Some time ago my fridge broke down. When the electrician who came to repair my appliance realized that he had to walk quite a distance, he was surprised and obviously annoyed that I didn't have a couple of Albanians ready at my orders to carry his toolkit. At another occasion, I had asked Kemal and Birbili, two of my Albanian co-villagers, to help me carry some furniture, but they arrived a bit late. The truck-driver, annoyed by the disruption of his schedule, asked ironically “where are the *rats*?” As this episodes of banal racism show, Albanian migrants are constructed in daily Greek discourse as exclusively male working bodies, without a name or individual identity, servants to a culturally superior Greek employer.

Remembered life stories offer migrants opportunities to “talk back” to these common sense attitudes they encounter in their daily lives. Many adult Albanian men, who had grown up in a society where male honour had in past times been a central value, have constructed their life stories around a sense of wounded masculinity, to which they respond by presenting the self as part of a superior moral community based on traditional patriarchal values. Illir, a former policeman from Southern Albania, remembered with bitterness the humiliation he felt when he was beaten up by a Greek policeman. He also used his life story to criticize Greek men for their soft manners towards their own women folk. Characteristically, he used the same animal metaphor as my truck driver, comparing a Greek man lighting his wife's cigarette to a “rat” (ποντίκι).

*“I didn't like the scene. If I would catch my wife smoking, I would string her up!  
Look. I gave up smoking and I'm a **man**. How on earth could I let my wife smoke?!”*

As these chunks of remembered lives clearly show, gender is an important aspect of the cultural responses through which migrants construct their subjectivities. Neo-patriarchal attitudes were a pervasive element of our interview material. Our data has

revealed an apparent contradiction between on the one hand shifting gender roles - with the empowerment of women through their work and their role as breadwinners - and the revival of traditional patriarchal gender ideologies on the other. This contradiction has led to tensions within migrant families, especially between parents and their teenage daughters. A crucial question we had to answer was whether this emphasis on traditional values was an element of continuity inherited from the past or a response to new challenges produced by the process of migration itself. To answer this question we need to turn our attention to the past and the ways in which men and women remember their past lived experiences.

The relation between gender, post-communist memory and migration I want to explore in this paper has been understudied. Migrant studies focus almost exclusively on the relations between migrants and their host country in the present. By ignoring the historically formed cultural capital these men and women have brought with them, they often fail to understand migrants' responses to new situations. They thus may contribute to the reinforcement of essentialist representations of the "Balkan migrant". On the other hand, the already impressive body of academic work on post-communist societies has largely focused on the economic and political aspects of the so-called "transition" to a market economy. In spite of the memory boom that has engulfed our societies, studies on the memory of the communist past are still relatively rare (Watson 1994, Pine-Kaneff-Haukanes 2004). These studies have revealed on the one hand a strong dose of nostalgia for the communist past, and on the other the re-emergence of hidden stories or counter-memories or the role of silence as a form of remembering (Pine-Kaneff-Haukanes 2004). But again, with a few notable exceptions, gender is rarely integrated as an analytical category through which we may analyze these memories of the communist past. Therefore it is often difficult to estimate to what extent the communist regimes of Eastern Europe have been successful in their homogenizing project and in their attempts to bring gender equality. This question is even more crucial when we deal with cases where, as in Albania and Bulgaria, communism was imposed on predominantly rural societies with strong patriarchal structures. Consequently, it is equally difficult to assess to what extent men and women embarked upon their migrant journeys with changed perspectives on gender roles with respect to the pre-war generation.

In this paper I will look at this relation between memory, migration and gender through a small number of life stories of adult men and women from Albania, who were interviewed under the thematic field of public culture. A few words about their background. Most of these men and women originally came from a rural background, but some spent a significant part of their formative years in an urban environment. Four out of six women came from Southern Albania, and two of them belonged to the pre-war generation. The other two women were born in Tirana and Durrës, resp. Three out of five men were born in Northern Albania, one in Tirana and one in the South. All three religions were represented in the sample, but for the majority of our interviewees religion did not play a major role in their lives. All eleven respondents had working experiences under communist rule, covering a wide range of professions. Among the women, one had worked in agriculture, two had been schoolteachers, one was a secretary, one had worked in a factory and one had been a bus conductor. The sample of men included one schoolteacher, one police officer, one physician, and two workers. Attitudes towards the communist regime of Enver Hoxha varied greatly. Only one woman was adamantly positive about the regime, some other informants had initially welcomed communist rule, but were later disappointed, some recognized both positive and negative aspects of life during the communist regime, while others were extremely negative. Overall, however, the women tended to have more positive memories than the men. Gender relations for women, property for men.

Life in socialist Albania was largely determined by two different, but interrelated currents of social thought: communist ideology and patriarchy. These were the social frameworks (as Halbwachs (1992) would say) that have structured our migrants' memories. And these memories in turn have influenced the ways in which they attributed meanings to their new experiences as migrants in a foreign country.

The regime of Enver Hoxha was similar in many aspects to other communist regimes in Eastern Europe, for example in the emphasis given to labour, education and modernization. But Albanian communism was also unique in at least two aspects. First, in the extreme isolation from the outside world and the impression it cultivated among its citizens that the country was beleaguered by enemies from without and from within. (Kretsi 2003) Second, in the attempt made by the regime to integrate communist ideology within a system of traditional notions. For example, the decision made in 1967 to ban religion, also unique in Eastern Europe, rested on the need to

overcome divisions of the past, but used to this purpose the traditional slogan of Albanian nationalism “*The religion of the Albanians is Albanianism*”. These two distinguishing features of Albanian communism resonate in the memories of mainly male migrants when they talk about their experiences in Greece. The notion of a country under siege is transposed in their discourse, when they present modern Greek society as a “country of all dangers”, where criminality, drugs, sexual freedom, sensual pleasure and consumerism form a serious threat to their women and children.<sup>1</sup> In this way they reverse the mainstream message channelled through the Greek media according to which the main threat menacing Greek society is the Albanian male migrant.

The other theme, the de-emphasizing of religious differences, is often nostalgically couched in a language of “friendship”, denoting the lack of discrimination in communist Albania. This message of the past is then contrasted to the practices of discrimination and pressure to convert to the Orthodox Church which Albanian migrants face in Greece. Illir, whose family belonged to the Bektash version of Islam, said: “*No matter whether you were Muslim, Turk or a Gypsy, people lived in harmony. That was the good thing about it. Here it is different. Now they say, Illir is not... and he can drop dead*”. In the discourse of women, this link between religion, tolerance and national unity is absent. On the contrary, many women presented religion as an act of resistance. Even when they were not religious themselves, they remembered secret religious practices carried out by their mothers or grandmothers at home, a phenomenon which Tamara Dragadze (1993) has aptly described as the “domestication of religion”. Some women belonging to Orthodox families used these memories to distance themselves from Islam, to stress their closeness to the host society and thus to destigmatize themselves.

The second major social system of thought, patriarchy, stemmed from a long tradition of isolated agropastoral communities, well documented by ethnographers (Kaser 1995, Hasluck 1954). Nicola Mai has described it as a system of “social relations and power structured rigidly around a central male leading figure”, which

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<sup>1</sup> See also Mai 2001: 271 on the stigmatisation of popular pleasure as another important feature of Albanian communism, but which is also a more general aspect of rural societies. These attitudes of Albanian men are often linked to the phrase “we are foreigners here” and clearly concern their experiences as migrants. In many cases, the same men remembered how they actively sought such pleasures as teenagers, contravening communist ethics, for example by watching secretly foreign TV stations. Their favourite activity was to watch love stories, proscribed by the regime. One man said: “having a flirt? That was a fiction movie for us”!

implied the “utmost submission of women to men” (Mai 2001: 267). The relation between these two systems of values and practices remained ambivalent throughout the communist period. The regime of Enver Hoxha established formal legal equality between men and women, created unprecedented educational and professional opportunities for girls, and made a frontal attack on the institution of the patriarchal extended family, with the explicit aim to break the power of the patriarchal clans of the North which opposed the regime. It also tried to break the rule of arranged marriages by popularizing the notion of “romantic love”. (Nicholson 2004:3) On the other hand, as argued by Nicola Mai, the cognitive framework of the patriarchal gender ideology remained largely unchallenged and we may indeed construe the whole communist system as a large patriarchal family with Enver Hoxha as the all powerful father at its head. (Mai 2001:270)

And yet, as the life stories of our Albanian migrants show, gender relations did change to a significant extent during the 40 years of communist rule, especially among the post-war generation. This transformation is apparent from both men’s and women’s memories, but the life stories of women are often constructed entirely around the tension between old and new gender relations. Overall, these stories show that gender practices were transformed in important ways, but that the gender ideologies that supported the old system preserved their impact on society.

The answers to the question “who was in command in your family” revealed that the exclusive male authority had begun to break down. Even among the men from Northern Albania, the stronghold of patriarchy, only two out of four answered it was the grandfather. The other two said it was the mother or that husband and wife shared responsibility. None of the women, all from Southern Albania, answered their father was in command, this role was taken over by the mother or by both parents together. Yet the public role of male power retained all its validity. Evgenia, for example, one of our two grandmothers, born in 1924, said she used to “spank her children *like a father*”. And Anieza, born in 1964 said her mother was in command, but would never show off her supremacy outside the home. She added that her father carefully locked the frontdoor, when he was to clean up the house, to avoid being seen doing the house chores “*as if he were the woman in the home*”. She thus confirmed the point made long ago by Ernestine Friedl about gender relations in rural Greece: that “the appearances of prestige can obscure the realities of power” (Friedl 1986: 42), but also the continued relevance of male supremacy in society.

The life stories of both men and women also revealed the gradual breakdown of sex segregation during communist rule. Boys and girls mixed freely at school, at the work place, and through the new institutions of the communist regime (work brigades, communist youth organizations). Many women expressed satisfaction about the new autonomy they enjoyed through their work and considerable pride in their job skills. Men focused their memories of adolescence on the secret adoption of western life styles and the proliferation of mixed-sex parties. But for both sexes this enthusiasm about a new habit in gender relations was contained by a concern for their social reputation and the impact this may have had on their families. Both men and women were well aware that they were being watched, both by the Party and by society.

Finally, the interviews also showed the gradual introduction of marriage out of love, instead of a marriage arranged by the couple's parents. Yet, even if a woman's marriage was based on romantic love, she was still expected to take up residence in her husband's extended household and submit to the rules dictated by her mother-in-law. The life stories of women born in the 1950s and 1960s are dominated by the conflicts generated in this setting between their own individual aspirations and the rules of the patriarchal extended family. These experiences are presented as a major turning point in their life, more important than the downfall of communism, and form a threshold to their migration process. One of these women, Sofia, born in 1968, constructed her earlier self as a rebel openly contesting the constraints of the patriarchal family: *"I put my foot down and didn't hold my tongue. I only spent two years with my mother-in-law, but to me it seemed they consumed 20 years of my life. Fortunately, the borders opened and we escaped. When I arrived in Greece, I felt I was reborn!"*

These two systems, communism and patriarchy, although they seemed mutually opposed from an official point of view, had two important common features. Both denied the expression of individual actions and desires, unless they were legitimized within a larger collective system (cf. Mai 2001:270 ) and both rested on reputation as an organizing principle in society. This link is best exemplified in another institution of Albanian communism, the biography. According to French anthropologist Gilles de Rapper in Albania "everyone was defined, evaluated and classified through his or her

‘biography’ (*biografi*), which was a judgement, in political terms, on one’s personality, acts and familial background.” He aptly described this system as “the conjunction of a political concept, the ‘class struggle’ as it was understood by both the authorities and the people, and the family or lineage (*fis*) as an institution of Albanian society.” (de Rapper 2006:1). “*If your grandfather was considered a “traitor” you were not allowed to study*”, one woman explained. As the memories of our migrants clearly show, each community was divided into families with a “good biography” and families with a “bad biography”. The struggle of each individual throughout his life was to avoid getting his biography “stained”, as this would have serious implications for the entire network of his close and distant relatives. Unlucky families with a “spoilt” biography, practically faced civil death as nobody dared to attend their funerals or celebrations or to contract a marriage with some of their kin.

Against this background, the migration project of both men and women appears as an attempt to construct their own individuality and to obtain their own individual and unspotted biography, free from the constraints of the past, rather than a project of purely economic advance. Many described the moment they passed the border as a turning point in their biography, as a joyful passage to a new and open horizon waiting for them at the other side of the border. Florin, a former schoolteacher from Northern Albania, described his decision to leave as a project to “smash the border” and to “root out the past”. In his account he defiantly crossed the border, all dressed in white and loudly singing, instead of sneaking in between the border guards.

Remember also Sofia’s notion of “*being reborn*” after her arrival in Greece. Anieza, using a female metaphor, described her joy upon seeing the first city lights as she approached the town of Volos: “*they looked like pearls in a woman’s necklace*”.

For many, however, this project of individual emancipation suffered serious setbacks during their first years of settlement, when they discovered that, once again, they had the “wrong” biography, that of an “Albanian”. Anieza again:

*“I don’t know how that happened to us, why we felt so ashamed, why we felt compelled to hide our origin... When I used to tell them I am from Albania, they looked at me as if I were a dead dog!”*

In order to cope with this situation, men and women drew on the cultural resources at their disposal in order to repair their newly spoilt biography. Just as in the past one of the ways to remove a spot from one’s biography was to join the Communist Party,

migrants soon discovered that in Greece the highway to become accepted was to join the Orthodox Church and to acquire a Greek name. This was a strategy employed more frequently by women than by men. Men, on the other hand, tried to find moral recognition by profiling themselves as a hard-working and reliable work-force. Others closed in on their own communities and tried to compensate for the humiliations they suffered in their daily lives by strengthening their sense of masculinity, as I have shown in the beginning of this paper. By doing so, they reinvented the patriarchal values from which, as their life stories show, they had tried to distance themselves during their adolescence.

The main point I wanted to make in this paper is that it is important to take into account the cultural and historical background of migrants, in order to understand their gendered experiences in their new host country. If we fail to do so, we can easily contribute to the perpetuation of current stereotypes which de-historicize and essentialize the image of the “Balkan migrant”. I have also argued that the retraditionalisation of gender relations which we have observed in our interviews should be seen rather as a result of the migration process than as a continuity with the past. I would like to end this paper, however, with a comment on those brave women who refuse to follow this traditional model of gender relations and try to carve out a personal trajectory of their own in their new environment. The situation of these women is particularly vulnerable. If they divorce or decide not to marry they receive no legal or moral support from Greek society, whereas within their own community they risk to face the same kind of civil death formerly reserved to individuals with a spoilt biography. Both men and women of the first generation of migrants seem to be caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of both societies and have found the doors closed to those open horizons they expected to find at their arrival. Our interviews with their sons and daughters have shown that they might be in a better position to overcome these dilemmas. But they have also shown that girls seem to be more successful in this task than their brothers.



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