

## **Aspects of Albanian and Bulgarian immigrants' Public Culture**

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Recent articles in the Greek press inform us that Albanian immigrants tend to leave their previous narrow underground apartments and rent better ones on higher floors while Pakistani, Kurds and other immigrants mainly from Asia come to replace them. In addition, Greek bankers consider the Albanians as the best of their clients as they save money much more than the Greeks. My father, who lives in Athens, complained to me a few days ago that he can no longer find a parking place for his car because "All the Albanians have bought cars". It seems that the Albanians of the first decade of the 21st century have managed to overcome many of the difficulties of the 90's and succeeded not only to survive but to open their pathway to prosperity.

It was with these Albanians that we talked during the research program of which some basic conclusions we present to you today. On my part I will focus on certain aspects of the broader thematic field of public culture and more specifically I will try to examine how the immigrants' past cultural capital affected their integration in the host country. Comparing Albanians to Bulgarians, I will try to explore the ways that immigrants used the cultural traits of the past so as to cope with the challenges of their new environment.

To start with, one of the main questions of our research was how the immigrants remember the communist past and most significantly how the communist experience influenced the understanding of their new social world. Actually it appears that most of them, Bulgarians and Albanians alike, are critical of the communist regime although there were some informants who considered that life was better back then. In general, those who belonged to families who cooperated with the regime or were members of the Communist Party tend to speak more positively about the regime today.

Most of the informants, (even opponents of the regime) stress the fact that under communist rule there was work for everyone (in contrast with today's insecurity), there was peace (in contrast with today's criminality) there was no discrimination on grounds of religion or language (in contrast with today's extensive racism) and there was social solidarity (in contrast with today's ruthless competition). As Illir, middle aged Albanian, said: *Under Hoxha's regime whenever someone had a need, the whole village would gather 5 drachmas to give him. Now nobody gives you anything. Does anybody help you?* Similarly, other informants stress the negative influence of money. For Petar, from Bulgaria, money was the reason behind the plethora of divorces that happened in Bulgaria after the fall of the communists while Katia thinks that in Hotzha's Albania there was "clean poverty" which is opposed to the "dirty poverty" of the present since "now whoever does not have to something to eat, steals and kills so as to get it". As a matter of fact Katia is still a communist. As she says under the communist regime :

*“There was calmness, peacefulness and love. There was love! Now you can not say to somebody ‘I love you’. Whoever comes behind you he wants something out of you. This is not love. From the moment that money and property, was involved, everything else is lost”.*

On the other hand the immigrants who were interviewed condemned the authoritarian character of the communist regime and the holistic control of the state over the lives of the people. Thus, there were Albanians who maintained that they had to renounce their commitment to marry the women they loved because they were informed by Party Officials that they had a bad (biografiko) biography. In addition, state manipulation of information was stressed negatively by Albanian informants who told us that they were *surprised* by the wealth they found in Greece when they first came because they had been told that Greece is a poorer country than theirs. We could argue that the Albanians were living in a form of a “communicative cage” during the Hoxha’s regime experiencing a version of George Orwell’s prophecy in the time when he had predicted. Yet, communicative isolation was not entirely successful: radio and television waves could not be kept outside the borders and most of the Albanians have a story to tell about a hidden antenna among the tiles in the roof or of a hidden radio receiver which allowed them to come in to contact with the outside world. Maybe one of the reasons of the collapse of the system (apart from economic failure) was its failure to control and check the flow of information towards the inhabitants of the country. The latter became outlawed, simply by turning their antenna in a direction different than the one appointed by the Communist Party. As a result one of the reasons that so many Albanians emigrated was their will to see what was “beyond the borders”.

Coming to motives for emigration, it seems that economic reasons were the main motives for Bulgarians to leave their country. But surprisingly, we found out that not all of our informants from Albania were economic immigrants in the first place. The pursue of a better economic situation appears to be the main motive to emigrate for the middle aged Albanians but this does not apply entirely to the women and the younger men. The women left their country so as to unite the family and come to be near their husbands who in most cases had left earlier.

For the younger men emigration is presented as a necessary challenge and as a way to confirm their masculine identity. In Bougiar words: *“I started feeling empty. Everywhere were only women. All of the men had gone. [...] One could not find a man to speak or to drink a cup of coffee. The place was full of women”*. There were many cases of young men who left because all of their friends had gone. One of them was Gregory who left at the age of 15 without telling his parents, because he wanted to escape from the control of his large patriarchal family. The trip to Greece could be seen as a rite of passage to adulthood for the young men of Albania. They had to venture into unknown mountainous territories, to overcome the cold, the hunger, the dark and the police and find a place to live and work.

Unlike the Bulgarians (who in most cases came in Greece using tourist visas to enter and then they extended their stay illegally) Albanians (and this applies for male Albanians not for the women) came through crossing the mountains on foot.

Clandestine residence leads to informal unemployment, but it also involves a life spent in constant fear and hiding from the police. In addition, they faced extreme suspicion and contempt from a large part of the local Greek population. Much more than our Bulgarian informants, Albanians have suffered from racist behavior. Racist feelings are related to their negative public image which connects the Albanians to

illegality, dirty work, criminality and backwardness<sup>1</sup>. Gradually even the word “Albanian” came to obtain a negative connotation and was often used by Greeks as a curse. Albanian informants have often used a very characteristic expression which encapsulates the feeling they had got after their encounters with Greeks: *“The first years that we came here most Greeks viewed us as dogs”*.

The extreme suspicion they faced and the need of a minimum of social recognition made them develop a series of ‘strategies’ so as to overcome such problems. Work came to be used (as Lamprini has shown) as a major vehicle of bridging the gap that separated them from the Greeks. According to their testimonies, they used to work from dawn to night, not only to earn money, but because they wanted to feel that they were accepted by the Greek society. Hard work came to acquire the meaning of an informal passport. As the Greek state deprived them from the legal passport, they claimed an informal one (through hard work) from the society itself.

Another strategy that was used was a voluntary shift in the cultural identity of the migrants (see also Hatziprokopiou 2004). Most of the Albanian immigrants changed their name to a Greek one, falsely supporting their Greek identity and their belonging to the Greek Orthodox minority of Northern Epirus.

As Anieza, middle aged woman from Southern Albania said:

*“I used to put this mask on my face as all the Albanian women used to do so as to look as the Greeks. I may have done it either because I wanted a job, or because I wanted to make you feel more comfortable with me thus making me feel more comfortable and avoiding seeing this miserable expression in the face of the others when I was saying that I was from Albania”*. (να μην νιώθω αυτή τη μιζέρια στο πρόσωπο των άλλων όταν λέω ότι είμαι Αλβανίδα)

As for Albanians who really were of Greek Orthodox origin, incorporation into the Greek society was slightly easier mainly because of certain benefits granted to them [(such as the five years permit of residence instead of the one year granted to the rest of the Albanians)] by the Greek state. Yet, many Greeks, according to their testimonies, showed mistrust and suspicion even to them and displayed racist behaviour<sup>2</sup>.

What was more interesting was that in some cases immigration meant for some Albanians of Greek origin a reassessment of their past identity. There were Albanians who used to reject the Greek identity and the Greek culture of their parents when they were in Albania but came to appreciate it and adopt it when they came to Greece. For instance Tzozefina refused to communicate in Greek with her mother when she was in Tirana as she thought that the Greek language was useless and rendered her a victim of discrimination. When she came to Greece she reevaluated her Greek cultural background and she reactivated it so as to build a new identity which could coexist with the old one. Thus today Tzozefina feels that she has both identities, Greek and Albanian, although her testimony leads us to assume that 20 years ago she would instantly reject her Greek identity. Cultural traits of the past (such as Orthodox religious practices and/or the Greek language) which were thought as worthless in Albania came to have an exchangeable value in the new setting, thus proving that

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<sup>1</sup> On Migration, criminality and stereotypes see also M. Pavlou 2001: 127-162, B. Karidis 2004: 205-232.

<sup>2</sup> See also Veikou 2001.

national identity is constantly changing, bounded as it is to the prospects of prosperity that each social environment offers. The need to get incorporated into the Greek society meant a reinvention of family tradition by stressing those cultural elements which can now be seen by a different angle and be used as a proof of cultural proximity with the Greeks.

Another way that was used by some Albanians to bridge the gap that separated them from the Greeks was their passage to Christianity. Baptism in a Greek church was extensively used as a means of integration into Greek society. In most cases, it was a superficial transition to the Orthodox Church which was happening so as to enjoy the friendship and the protection that was offered by their Greek godparents who were in most cases a neighbor or an employer of them. Having Greek godparents was a means to establish links with the community by entering social networks which could help them find a job or even help them to learn the Greek language.

For Bulgarians who were already orthodox Christians, religion was not used as a vehicle for adaptation to Greek society. What struck us in relation with Bulgarians was that many of them (especially the women) did believe in magic, in transmigration of the soul and reincarnation.

And here we come to another visible difference between Bulgarians and Albanians. Unlike Albanians, the majority of the Bulgarians interviewed expressed their wish to return home<sup>3</sup>. This is something that may be related with their strongest national identity. The latter is inextricably connected to the better economic situation in Bulgaria which at the time of the interviews was to become a member of the European Community.

For the Bulgarians, Greeks are presented as richer and more developed. However this is attributed to the historical circumstances (as Greece did not experience communism) rather than to the superior quality of the Greek culture. Gentso, a 65 year old Bulgarian, did not miss to tell me that when his father was a soldier in Thessaloniki in 1943 poverty was so extreme that there were Greeks who had to sell their houses for a sack of flower. We could assume that he often tells this story to the Greeks in an attempt to prove that Bulgaria was not always poorer than Greece, indicating the historicity of contemporary situation. Other Bulgarians pointed out that they preferred living in their own country rather than in Greece stressing their love for their country and its people. In addition, some Bulgarians maintained that most of the Greeks are obstinate and racists and they do not know how to conduct a civilized dialogue.

Unlike the Bulgarians, most of the Albanians interviewed declared their will to stay permanently in Greece. Although they feel that they are not accepted as equals by most of the Greeks and have often experienced racism and discrimination they want to make a better future for them and their family in their new country. Especially for the younger Albanians (as Alexandra has shown) "life is only in Greece" as they connect Greek culture with the possibilities of entertainment that Greece offers. Most of the younger Albanian women do not want to live in Albania because of the many restrictions put upon women and middle aged women do not wish to return to the depressing environment of their parents in law of which, through immigration, they managed to escape.

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<sup>3</sup> This is also verified by a research to 153 Bulgarians immigrants that showed that 80% of them want to return to Bulgaria while the rest 20% said that they were uncertain, Markova 2001:273

Yet, Greek nationalism does not recognize the immigrants as part of the Greek nation and this concerns not only the immigrants but their children as well who are not entitled to Greek citizenship even if they were born in Greece. Greek nationalism was vividly manifested in the reactions of the press and the local societies to the flag-bearing of distinguished immigrant students during the national school parades. According to Greek Law all those studying in the Greek schools and taking part in Greek education should have the right to be honoured with flag-bearing regardless of ethnic origin. However, protests occurred every year during the national celebrations. Although one could expect that the immigrants would react to the discriminatory character of these protests it appeared that almost all of the immigrants that were interviewed regardless of sex, age and ethnic origin did actually agree with the Greeks. As Tolis a young Albanian of 22 years old said:

*"This flag does not belong to me. How should I say it to you? It does not belong to me. I am an Albanian. How could I possibly hold it? The flag is sacred. A stranger should not hold it. Only a man with Greek blood [should]"*.

The above statement is characteristic of the immigrants' reactions to the issue and shows the similarity of Balkan nationalisms which are mutually exclusive and base the criterion of belonging to a nation on origin and blood. This view of nationalism rejects the possibility that a man could perhaps belong to more than one nation and raise more than one flag. Under the nationalistic context the national flag is connected with fighting and war. Two of the Albanian women used the exact same phrase to explain why they should not allow their children to hold the Greek national flag during the parade, saying: *"They did not fight for this flag"* *"they did not spill their blood for this flag"*.

It is important to note that the above thoughts were expressed even by immigrants who were trying to get integrated into the Greek society, and even by immigrants who consider themselves Greek as members of the Greek minority that lived in Albania. This could be seen as an internalization of Greek nationalism which separates people into those who were born in Greece, had Greek parents and are accepted as Greeks and those who "have no Greek blood" and thus cannot be accepted as part of the Greek national group.

Identity is the result of a dynamic relationship between the individual and society. As the immigrant realizes that he is not going to be accepted as a Greek by the Greek society, he ceases to claim that recognition. As he understands that Greek nationalism (as other Balkan nationalisms) consider Greekness as an innate, natural, objective feature, bore in the blood rather than in the subjective choice of the individual and as he encounters incidents of racism and exclusion he tends to intensify his own nationalism. This was strongly demonstrated after the football game between Albania and Greece where many thousands of Albanians celebrated the victory of their national team quarreling and even fighting with Greeks who were shouting at them that "You are Albanian and you are never going to be Greeks" (Δεν θα γίνεις Έλληνας ποτέ, Αλβανέ, Αλβανέ). This was also shown by a young informant, high school student, named Gregory who told me that not only he refuses to hold the Greek flag in the parades but he does not participate in the parades at all.

Thus Nationalism, unlike religion, seems to hinder integration into Greek society for a part of the Albanian immigrants. Actually, Albanian nationalism was nurtured under

the communist regime which managed (as it is shown in all of our interviews) to eradicate religious differences and promote the dogma that “the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism” (Lubonja 2002: 92-94). Myths of Albanian nationalism were expressed in some of our interviews and proved Albanians’ willingness to differentiate them from the Ottoman Turks. Thus many Albanians often referred to the fact that **they** had evicted the Turks from their country stressing that George Kastrioti also known as Skenderbeg, a medieval national hero, by fighting away the Ottomans they prevented them to enter Europe. As one of our informant said: *“Skenderbeg saved the Europeans from the Turks but nobody recognizes that”*. Maybe by differentiating themselves from the Turks they try to get closer with the Greeks by stressing the fact that both had a common historical enemy, the Turks. For instance, Dimos, a middle aged Albanian, despite being a Muslim himself, stated that under the Ottoman Empire all Albanians were Christians but the Turks forced a part of them to become Muslims. Presenting the Muslim religion of many Albanians as a historical accident is rather interesting especially if this is generated by someone who is a Muslim himself and is an indication of the Albanians’ will to distinguish themselves with the “age old” enemies of the Greeks, the Turks.

Concluding, I would like to share with you one of the phrases that touched me most in one of my encounters with the immigrants. It was when Altin a young informant of 23 said: *“I would like to thank my parents because they gave birth first to my older brother and then to me, thus sparing me all the troubles and the harassments that he went through”*. Unlike the Greeks (and the other peoples of the South Mediterranean) who used to work in large factories when they went to the northern European countries in the 60’s, immigrants in Greece work in the Greeks’ little enterprises or houses. As a result they intermingle with them and they gradually become an organic part of the society of their host country. Although generally, racism still exists, in the level of the neighborhood, the church, the school or the working environment most Albanians seem to have earned some recognition and acceptance. Their integration has not yet been completed but it is an ongoing process which we had the chance to study because of this research programme that we presented to you today.