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Transborder Mobility,  
Ethnic Groups and Boundaries  
on the Albanian-Greek Frontier

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WITH THE VLACHS OF KORÇË. DRENOVË,  
BOBOSHTICE, DARDHË AND THE ENVIRONS

*With Foto in Korçë*

We leave Voskopojë the next day at noon. Our intention is to visit Korçë and then the nearby Vlach villages. We arrive at Korçë in the early afternoon. It is unpleasantly hot. We decide to stay at the Hotel Gold in the city centre. Hotel prices are at around 20-25 euro. After the siesta we go out for coffee. We go directly to Villa Korçë. Foto has returned from Greece. The waiter lets him know we are here and he comes to meet us with obvious pleasure. He offers us coffee and we begin to talk. His merchant business is doing well. We comment on the political news. He expresses his opposition to the Union of Human Rights Party because, in his opinion, they do not have a clear political orientation or consistency; indeed, quite the opposite: "They sometimes go this way and sometimes that way." I ask him about the Vlach situation. He tactfully avoids to talk about the division inside the community. He says that Vlachs generally mind their own business, which is what they always

did and that's why they prospered. He adds that they are dominant in the economy in Korçë: all good businesses and shops belong to them. Only after I insist on the matter of the Vlachs' national orientation does he tell me that the influence of those with Romanian connection is practically non-existent. At any rate he seems unwilling to talk about it for long.

We change the subject. I ask him about Thanas Poci. He tells me that he is in Tirana, but he immediately tries to get in touch with him through his brother-in-law. We manage to establish a telephone connection, and he passes him on to me. I speak to him in Vlach, saying that I am calling on behalf of his cousin Odysseas Potsis in Jannina. At first he replies in Vlach, but soon he turns into flawless Greek. He tells me he is very busy because his party is in continuous negotiations with Berisha for the formation of a government cabinet. His words confirm what Foto has just been telling me about the Union of Human Rights Party: Thanas is a member of that party. In the previous socialist government of Fatos Nano he was deputy minister of health.

One can talk to Foto for hours. He is a typical case of a man who minds his own business and has very clear goals set for himself and for his family. He tells me that Greece is a better place to live but the big money is in Albania and if one is clever, loads of it can be made. He tells me that Albanians are hardworking, honest people; the problem lies with the government. Foto is one of those Albanian Vlachs who turned



to Greece immediately after the border opened, reactivating all the links they had with it and acquiring Greek citizenship. He



is a person who lives a trans-national life crossing the geopolitical and symbolic border almost every day.



*Figure 44. Korçë*

*Figure 45. Animal bazaar in Korçë*

*The ex-employee of the Greek consulate*

We take our leave of Foto and we have a stroll in the town. The main street is closed to traffic in the evenings and becomes a pedestrian street for people to stroll up and down. It is an image which evokes vividly the city of Jannina in the 1970s. One feels that the whole town is pouring out in this street and that its people are somehow “on show”. Men and women of all ages walk up and down the street in a relaxed, communicative atmosphere. The emigrants’ presence (people who have migrated and are only back for the holidays) is more than obvious; Greek music is wafting from surrounding shops and cafes. Street hawkers and roasted sweet-corn sellers complement the vivid picture.

After a few strolls we enter a grill restaurant named “Karavi” (Boat in Greek). The name is Greek, and so is everything else in the place. The owners speak fluent Greek and it is obvious that they are former emigrants who have returned from Greece. Later I find out that they, too, are Vlachs. They worked in a grill restaurant of the same name in Athens for many years. They are particularly friendly with us

and they keep asking us whether we are pleased with the service.

As we walk down another street later, we pass by a souvlaki place named "Kamara." The owner here speaks fluent Greek and has Greek manners. We speak to him and he tells us at once that he is a Vlach. His name is Giorgio Belo. He worked in Thessaloniki for many years, and he was a clerk in the Greek Consulate in Korçë for another two. He has many connections with Greece and he seems very well informed on the "Vlach question". He knows people and things in the Greek Consulate. Indeed, he admits that during his service at the consulate he had the opportunity to make himself rich through the process of issuing visas to Greece, but refused to take advantage of it. He tells us that he learned Greek as an adult and that he did not take the Greek nationality, although he could, because he would have to serve in the Greek army for three months. He is very eager to talk about the Vlachs; he seems to be personally interested in the matter. He is passionate about the hard-working habits of Vlachs, their success in business, as well as their Greekness. He points at himself as an example: he works hard, from early morning till late night. He claims that this was the reason he got a divorce from his first wife. He has a Vlach wife now, and she understands and supports him. He adds very seriously that royal families knew a thing or two when they did not intermarry... He tells us many things. His national orientation

is clearly Greek. He cites specific Greek academic books on the Vlach issue, which have formed his view significantly: he takes his arguments on the Greekness of Vlachs from them. He is very negative about the Albanians' refusal to accept estimates of the Vlach population in their country, at the same time refusing to do a census themselves. Among other things, he mentions an old ledger left to him by his grandfather, who was a grocer in Shipckë. He promises to give me a copy of it, together with some publications on the subject of Vlachs.

The next day we take our morning coffee at the cafe by the Vlach church of Shën Sotiri. The woman who owns the cafe has worked in Greece, too; the music in the cafe is Greek. I visit the church. I take a photograph of the large sign that announces the project of its construction:

KISHA ORTHODOKSE  
 AUTOQEFALE SHQIPTARE  
 OBJECTI: KISHA ORTHODOKSE  
 AROMUNE E "SHËN SOTIRIT"  
 Investoi: NDHIMA NGA BESIMTARE AROMUNE  
 RUMUNE E SHQIPTARE NGA SHQIPERI, RUMANIA, AMERICA  
 Projekttoi: S.C. ,"PROJECT ARGES" S.A. PITESTI RUMANI  
 DIRECTOR GENERAL           SEF. C.S.C.T.E.  
 ING.DUMITRACHE EUGENIU ARCH. MULTESCU MARIA  
 2 batoi: FIRMA SIMACU  
 (Autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church  
 Project: Vlach Orthodox Church of the Holy Saviour.

Investment: Contributions from pious Vlachs, Romanians and Albanians from Albania, Romania, America.

Project: S.K. "Project Arges" S.A. Pitesti Rumani

Director General: Engineer D.E., Architect M.M., Company S.)



Figure 46. The Vlach church in Korçë

While I take photographs and examine the place, a man is sweeping the churchyard. I go near him tactfully and ask him about the church in Vlach. He replies, in Vlach, that this is the Vlach church, the interior of which was left unfinished due to lack of funds. It is being cleaned now because on August 6 it is the Saint's Day (the church festival) and many people will come from all over Albania for the celebrating liturgy.

As I leave I meet an old lady who has come to church to light a candle. We speak. She is Vlach, too, from the Niço clan, as she says, and she has relatives in the village Karvounari in Thesprotia. She asks me where I come from, and when I say I am from Denisko, she says: “Ni scula perlu” (my hair is standing on end). Indeed she looks very much moved by our encounter. I ask her about the church and she replies it is the Vlach church and she has come here to light a candle. I think that people like her can have nothing to do with agendas and propaganda. They are the faithful, they only see the religious side. Indeed they are relieved that after half a century’s worth of oppression they are at last free to express their belief and the symbolic dimension that is immanent in the exercise of religious duty. My thoughts are soon confirmed by Giorgio Belo.

I go back to Giorgio’s place; we have an appointment so that he can give me his grandfather’s old ledger. He has also brought a book on Vlachs. We begin to talk. He tells me a few more things about himself. There is a typical story concerning his name. His father had named him Alban, having been obliged to pick a name from a special list under the previous regime. However, that name was never used. Even at school the other children called him Giorgio. He was Alban only on official papers. He speaks to me of his grandmother; she knows many Vlach songs. He narrates a story that shows what Vlachs thought of Muslim Albanians, whom they call “Turks”. His

grandmother lived in the village of Mborje, where there were Muslims as well as Christians. She went to a funeral (bearing tattoos of crosses on her forehead and hands) and she sang a dirge lament for the dead man in Vlach:

“Let what remained no more remain  
Seven every week”

Jorgo explains the meaning of the lines: let none of them – meaning the Muslims – remain, let seven of them die every week. He laughingly adds that the Muslims thought she was mourning for the dead man while she was really cursing them all...

### *Drenovë*

We take leave of Giorgio and are on our way to the Vlach villages on the direction of Ersekë. A few kilometres off the main road on the left, at the foot of Mount Moravë, there is the village of Drenovë. It is a picturesque village, lush with vegetation, bearing many signs of building and reconstruction. The first thing that strikes me is the great number of houses being built; apparently they belong to emigrants. We stop at the cafes of the central square. In one of them there are groups of mostly elderly men drinking and talking. I speak to them in Vlach and they respond with enthusiasm. I greet them one by one, and they all invite us to sit at their table.

We sit with the most numerous company; they are the eldest, too. We begin the introductions. All their surnames sound familiar to me: Fouki, Nita, Grammozi, Kapourani, Michallari, Nikollari... Most of these family names can be found in Kefalovriso, in Pogoni, and also in other villages on the Greek side where there are Arvanite-Vlachs. They are former nomad livestock breeders, who settled here permanently after the establishment of the communist regime in Albania in the 1950s. Before that, these particular families moved with their flocks from their winter quarters in the region of Sarandë, and mainly in Konispol, to the mountain pastures of Moravë, Northeast of Drenovë.

They offer us *raki* made from mulberries, and the discussion immediately revolves around the Vlach issue. They are passionate on the subject and proud of their Vlach identity; they love their relatives in Greece and they are nostalgic about the past year of the nomad communities. On the other hand, they are very bitter about Enver Hoxha's policy of confiscating their herds, leaving each family with only ten animals: this had a disastrous effect on their way of life, and it also hurt their pride and sense of honour. They speak with dislike about Muslim Albanians, whom they call "Turks," and with great emotion about Greece and Greeks. They seem to consider Orthodox Albanians as their own people. They all have children in Greece and they have all visited the country,



several times. Those who sought a Greek passport obtained it, for themselves and for their children.



*Figure 47. A group of Vlachs in Drenovë*

I have a nice warm feeling being there with them, and their words cause thrills of emotion in me; they remind me so much of the Arvanite-Vlachs of Thessaly, with whom I have spent a great part of my childhood and teenage years. They invite us to stay in their houses; they will offer us hospitality “by turns”. We talk in Vlach, but when it is necessary to speak in Greek, due to my friend’s presence there, we speak Greek, which they all speak clearly but with some difficulty.

They ask me about my “milleti” (origin) and when I tell them I am from Denisko they are all very enthusiastic about it because they all know my village and most of them have had some relation to people from there. I am aware of the fact that when Vlachs here talk about “milleti” they mean kinfolk, so I tell them my surname, which derives from the name Niço, with which, of course, they are quite familiar.

We said a lot. They spoke proudly about the many churches and chapels of the village and especially mentioned the cathedral church of Saint Constantine, which celebrates the Saint’s Day (May 21) with a festival. Those people induced in me a sense of pride and optimism I kept feeling during the following days. I am left with the impression that the totalitarian regime did not succeed in defeating those “old bones”, even though it did try to destroy their self-esteem... I took my leave of them unwillingly, explaining that I needed to visit the other Vlach villages as well. They bid us farewell using the well-known expression “uarë bunë” (farewell, good hour) and their eyes expressed how glad they were to have met us.

### *Boboshtice*

We take the road to Boboshtice. On the way we come across a small settlement; there is an elderly man on a field there laying out wheat grain to dry. We approach him and begin to talk; we ask to buy a little wheat grain. He invites us to his house, where

he gives us the grain for free and his wife offers coffee and *raki*. Right across the street from his house lives a lady who comes from Zervat of Dropull; she is of Greek origin and is married here. We speak to her for a while. Her grandchildren approach us, too; their Greek is fluent. They live in Athens with their parents and are here for the summer holidays. One could say that the presence of children of emigrants from Greece is one of the typical aspects of most Southern Albanian villages at this time of the year. Another typical aspect is newly erected houses, usually next to the old ones, which emigrants build for when they decide to return definitely, a future that seems rather distant for the time being. This particular settlement, I find out later, was built by the previous regime for the needs of an agricultural cooperative (administration services, warehouses, etc.) This is something one can deduce easily, by looking at the structure and form of the settlement and the particular buildings.

We then reach Boboshtice, also situated at the foot of Mountain Moravë. On entering the settlement we meet an old woman dressed in black, head covered with a black scarf. She is collecting red mulberries, which they use here to make *raki*. I greet her in Vlach and she reciprocates. Her name is Athina Marku. She has a family in Kefalovriso. All of her seven children are emigrants to Greece; four in Athens, three in Larissa. As we speak her mobile phone rings: it is one of her sons, with whom she speaks in Vlach. I notice she says

“hiritimati a li mviasti” (greetings to the daughter-in-law). Later I find out she speaks Greek too. I ask her if I can take a picture of her and she accepts. Her pose reminds me of old photographs.

What impresses me at the entrance of this village is the number of mulberry trees. There are whole orchards of them, and they appear to have been very well-kept till recently. There are dry-stone walls built round the tree trunks, filled with pressed earth: this facilitates the collection of the fruit. Some of these constructions have thick plastic sheets laid on them. They remind me very much of the mastic trees of Chios. I taste the mulberries: they are delicious and juicy and they leave red marks on our hands. A neighbour gives us a tip about taking the colour off: we must rub them with unripe, green mulberries. This neighbour introduces himself: he came to Boboshtice as a bridegroom. His wife is a member of the Belo family, a cousin of Jorgo Belo from Korçë. His name is Pavlo and his surname Giorgo. He is not a Vlach, and according to him this is the reason why he has not got a Greek passport, while his wife and children have. They all live in Athens; he works there but is here now to supervise the building of his new house. He does not think his children will want to return here, but the house is being built for him, just to have it there and spend the holidays and perhaps live after his retirement. The building is right next to the main street, where there are many newly built houses, or under construction. It is typical of

those villages that when new buildings are erected they tend to be moving towards and along the main street, particularly when there is a motorway, drifting away from the foot of the mountain and abandoning the traditional circular shape of the settlements in favour of a linear one. Some typical examples are the settlements on the motorway between Korçë - Ersekë.

We go through Boboshtice and move towards the direction of Dardhë. Just outside the settlement I am attracted by a beautiful fountain next to a roadside chapel with the icon of Saint Anargyroi. On the front of the chapel there is an inscription: "Dhurate Sterjo Tona" (Donation of Stergjo Tona). I am familiar with the surname of Tona from the Arvanite-Vlachs of Greece, particularly in the region around Thesprotia. We meet Hristaqui Shaka here and talk with him. He tells me that for many years he worked in Greece as a shepherd to the herd of Hristos Ziagas, a Vlach livestock breeder from Samarina who spends the winter in Ambelonas near Larissa. He tells me that his brother lives and works in the village Rodia of Tirnavos. Hristaqui Shaka is retired now but his three children are still in Greece working; one son is a builder, the other a cheese-maker and his daughter works at various jobs. He characteristically says in Vlach: "All our children are there, we only have old people here." His house is next to the spring and fountain. Soon his wife appears holding a grandchild in arms. She tells me she spent last winter in Athens looking after the grandchildren while her children were at work. I ask her if

she speaks Greek but her answer is negative. When I ask her how she managed in Athens without speaking any Greek she says: "I stayed in the house." Her name is Evyenia and she comes from the Leventi family, who she says are from Trikala. She asks me where I come from and when I reply "Denisko," to my great surprise she says that her family came originally from Denisko, then moved to Vithkuq and then to Boboshtice.

### *Dardhë*

As we leave Boboshtice we see the chapel of St. Nikolas on a hilltop to our left. The way to Dardhë is uphill. As we go higher the landscape becomes alpine, with forests of oaks, pines and beeches. We also cross large meadows where I can see traces of past agricultural activities. The previous regime had ploughed every inch of relatively flat ground, even on such a high altitude, in order to create "bread-producing places". In the same manner it "sowed" the land with the notorious concrete gun-turrets, which look even more grotesque up here and emphasise the absurdity of that regime. We come across apiculture installations, also a modern small plant of water-bottling. It strikes me that although this is pastoralist landscape *par excellence*, we do not see any animals. We reach a high pass; from this point on the road goes down a slope. There is a crossing here and a sign that shows to Arrëz on the right and

to Dardhë on the left. We follow the dirt road to Dardhë; it is in bad condition. We keep on descending for quite some time. From the distance I can see a big building. Before we reach it, we pass by a fenced-in area which looks like a summer camp. It appears to be deserted. We approach the big building. It is a construction site for a big hotel complex in the forest. I am shocked at the violation of the natural scale and the enforcement of concrete on this beautiful landscape. I see some builders working on scaffolds. Somebody waves hello. We keep on descending. Soon we enter the settlement. It is a village of stone houses lush with vegetation. On the left there is a sign: Bar-Bufe. A little further off there is a very basic car park, and even further a quite impressive church. It is the church of St. George, which is undergoing restoration.

We leave the car at the car park and head for the hotel across the road. It is a formerly state-owned hotel which is now leased to private businessmen. In the old times it was used by party members for the summer and winter holidays. It is a two-storied stone building, with a restaurant and a large courtyard with a kiosk, benches and a fountain. There are groups of people having lunch or drinks in the courtyard; we greet them. Then we speak to the people in charge of the rooms. I shouldn't be surprised really: both the man who has got the lease on the hotel and his son-in-law who helps him are Vlach. The son-in-law is from Pogradec and he speaks Greek which he learned in Greece: he lived there for a number of years. His wife and her



mother (his mother-in-law) speak Vlach with a very thick Arvanite-Vlach accent.

I cannot confirm my previous information of Dardhë being a Vlach village. There are very few Vlach families here and they came in after 1950. The old inhabitants of the village were Orthodox Albanians and most of them have moved to the urban centres of Albania, mainly Tirana and Korçë; some went to America.

*Figure 48. Dardhë: Partial view*



From the very first moment I experience an uncommon spiritual stimulation in this place. There is something strongly evocative here. I feel the weight of history descend upon me. There is a fine drizzle; a mist is rising here and there, which completes the mysterious atmosphere of the place. The narrow streets, the houses, the gardens, everything in this place evokes images of my childhood. I reflect on the unity of the wider Epirote space: unity in diversity. I think of all those groups who have lived here together for centuries: Greek-speaking, Albanian-speaking, Vlach-speaking, Christian, Muslim, Bektashi...

The inscriptions on corner stones are in Greek, mostly dated back to the interwar years. I walk around the place, my breath taken away, shooting photographs. Here and there I see teams of builders restoring, repairing or rebuilding houses on the foundations of old, ruined ones. It is a surprising sight in such a mountainous, remote area. Is it the prospect of tourist development or the dynamics of the Dardhë diaspora returning to their birthplace? A combination of both, perhaps.

I approach a building site. I talk to a man my age, brownhaired, of average height. He speaks broken Greek and soon I find out he is a Vlach. His name is Thoma. He explains that he is not from the village, that he lives in Korçë, where he is a building contractor; he bought this plot of land to build a holiday home for himself and his family. He comes from Drenovë, where his father's house is. He is very happy to hear

that I am a Vlach, too, and he is eager to show me around the village.

While we walk he talks about the old inhabitants of Dardhë with great admiration. “They were all Christian Orthodox. There was not one single Muslim here; we call them *bilic* (skinned)” he says emphatically. He speaks with great disdain about the Muslim Albanians, whom he calls Turks; he separates them from the Christian Albanians, for whom he only has good things to say. They were always on the best of terms with them, he says. He also has only good words for the villagers, pointing out that this place has given birth to very important people, distinguished in letters, politics, commerce, etc. He points to a newly-built house: it belongs to the Mayor of Tirana. Another one belongs to a famous writer, a third to an MP. I realise that this village is a fashionable place for the elite of Tirana and that it is bound to become an important resort and tourist destination.

While he speaks of the present, I look at the large stone houses and realise that the wealth of this mountainous place goes back to the late period of Ottoman rule which has left its mark all over the Balkans.

We approach the cemetery. “Murmintu”, he says; the word meaning cemetery or grave. It is a word which I know rather from oral Vlach literature than the spoken language: I do not recall having ever heard it in my village. I look at the names on the graves. The first names are Christian, the surnames

familiar: Kakuri, Kaçani, Coti, Ceku, Comi, Daku, Dolo, Filipi, Farmaqi... I take a photograph of the memorial dedicated to the founders of the village, erected with the financial aid of the Greek Consul of Korçë. I ask about the Vlach surnames; the answer I get is that the only Vlach surnames here are Dhima and Kapurani: these are ArvaniteVlach surnames which I encounter all over the region. It is clear that the old inhabitants of Dardhë were not Vlach.

We leave the cemetery behind and walk around the narrow streets of the village. We come across an old man in his nineties; he is wearing a hat. Thoma whispers to me that during the Hoxha years this man was an agent of the *Sigurimi* (secret police) and that he sent many a person to *hapsi* (prison). It was his job to denounce all suspects. "He made sure nobody fled to Greece", Thoma concludes.

After we have wandered in the settlement for about an hour, Thoma and I go back to the hotel, where we continue our talk. I learn many things from him. He has relatives of the same surname in the village Kria Vrisi, near Giannitsa, where he has lived and worked for many years. He has a Greek passport, too. When I ask about his national identity and consciousness, he tries to answer in Vlach: "*Him Grets*" (We are Greek), but before finishing his phrase he changes "*Grets*" to "*Ellini*" (Hellene). Obviously "*Grets*" did not work for him, because in the Vlach language there is a distinction between Vlachs (Armëni) and Greeks (Greek-speaking, Grets); if a Vlach says:

“I am Grecu” (Greek), it is of course problematic and creates confusion. If our talk had been carried out in Greek, there would not have been a problem; he would just say: “*Eimaste Ellines*” (we are Hellenes). Besides, the Vlachs of Greece self-identify as *Ellines* (Hellenes) and not as *Greci*, because the latter is the term referring to the Greek-speaking people from whom they distance themselves, as we have pointed out elsewhere. Here ends the discussion with Thoma.

### *Cinicë*

A little later, near sunset, we decide to visit the next village Cinicë. We walk down an ill-kept road, through a lush green landscape. There are small vegetable gardens, and old flower gardens everywhere. There are many little springs, abundant water. So many plum-trees; so much reminds me of Linotopi, a place where I used to spend the summers in my father’s sheepfold. That place is so near here, just on the other side of the border. In fact, before I looked at the map I had been under the impression that the village after Dardhë would be Nikolicë, the ruined village next to Linotopi.

Just outside the village we meet a man with two horses carrying wood. I speak to him in my inadequate Albanian. His name is Elia and he is very glad to see us. He tells us he will meet us at the village. Later I learn that timber is the main

produce of the village: they sell it to merchants who come from Korçë.

On entering the village we meet few people; mostly children who run towards us looking very curious, as if they have never seen strangers before. I believe that within a few minutes the whole population of the village has gathered on the main street where we stop. I find out that there is nobody here who speaks either Greek or Vlach; this is my chance to practise my Albanian. A woman shows me her mobile phone and says she cannot speak to her sister in Naousa, Greece; the recorded answer-phone message is in Greek (the mobile service provider is Greek) and she cannot understand what it says.

The village children, about ten in all, keep running after us. Elia's son is among them; he keeps begging for money: "o burra, lek" (O man, money). They want to show us their church, of which they seem to be very proud. It is the church of St. Nikolas, a typical stone building, white-washed on the inside. All the old icons on the iconostasis have been replaced by new ones, most of which are donated by a family whose origins are here but have been living in Naousa for a very long time. The inscriptions are in Greek.

Directly opposite the church, and not far from it, there are two large buildings, which I am told are the village schools. In the old times there were as many as 300 pupils; there are no more than 15 now. It is obvious that here, too, operates the

same phenomenon of urbanisation that took place in Epirus in the 1960s, which caused an unprecedented demographic haemorrhage in the area.

On the outskirts of the settlement there is a stream with clear babbling water irrigating the fields on both sides. I see a water mill by the stream; it looks deserted. What is interesting about this settlement compared to other villages nearby is that there is not one new building here: all the houses are old, made of stone with slate roofs. I cannot even see signs of any repairs carried out anywhere. The contrast to Dardhë is very deep. I wonder about it: is it because Dardhë is investing the important symbolic capital of its past and its diaspora, or is there something else that comes into play?

Poverty, neglect and misery are stamped on the place and etched on the faces of the people. They seem to feel so totally abandoned to their fate that they are very perplexed about our interest in their village. They look at me with very sceptical expressions when I tell them that their village is very beautiful. I feel the look in their eyes is saying: "Oh, yeah? Come and spend some time here and then we'll talk."

After our brief wander we returned to the village centre. My friend yields to the supplications of Elia's small son and gives him 2000 lek (around 1,5 euros). The child is ecstatic. His father urges him to give the money to his mother. I reflect on how poverty and misery corrode values and self-respect. These "children of eagles" are not simply wounded; their very

morale is broken. The more I talk to them the more saddened I become. The only thing to offer itself as a counterweight to the miserable impression of human society here is nature: it has got a chance to thrive again now that the people have gone away. But what looks beautiful to the eye of a middle-class foreigner is only a more emphatic lack of human presence for the local people. The streets and open spaces are deserted; the paths and roads are abandoned; opportunities for those left behind are scarce... They tell us all about it, but they do not need to...

We end up at the cafe. It is a new, makeshift construction with a small buffet and two small tables with chairs. Judging by the exterior, one would never think that this small building is a cafe. It belongs to a young couple; the woman is pregnant. They offer us buttermilk and then *raki* made from wild plums. They have a tape-recorder, and they play Greek music to please us. I tell them I would rather listen to Albanian songs. They choose a tape with modern neo-demotic songs from the Voskopojë region. My poor Albanian is not much help to the conversation, but I insist on asking questions. They tell me that in the past the village was purely Orthodox but now some Muslims live here. Elia's wife tells me she is Catholic; she comes from the North. It was one of Enver Hoxha's policies to encourage mixed marriages as a means to eradicate all religious and ethnic differences, basing his vision of a socialist society on solid national cohesion.

Our wish to communicate breaks down the barrier of language difficulties. Although I am not very happy about how bad my Albanian is, they seem very happy about my efforts to speak their language. At sunset I tell them that we have to go. I ask for the bill, but the woman says: “Yo” (no); her husband explains it is a tradition. A man is glaring at them, trying to get across the message that it is wrong not to accept payment. We leave 2000 leks on the table. The children are waiting for us outside the cafe, and they follow us all the way to the car. When we are there, I give them a piece of baklava klava from Jannina, instructing them to share it among them. A woman undertakes to share it out equally; they flock around her; it’s like a party. I never thought a piece of baklava could bring so much joy to children...

We return to Dardhë. On the way back we are wondering how it can be possible that only a few kilometres away from the Greek border there are people who live under such conditions of abandonment and misery...





*Figure 49. Children at Cinicë*

That night in Dardhë we have a supper of fried kaskaval cheese, roast lamb and salads. We drink lots of good red wine made locally. We begin the meal sitting in the hotel courtyard but the fine drizzle obliges us to move back inside the restaurant. It is a nice place, cosy and well-tended, with many old objects hanging on the walls and above the large fireplace. The hotel managers have worked in the tourist trade in the village Portaria on Mount Pelion, Greece, for many years; this is where they got the idea for the decor. We meet a family, a lady with her two children and her father. They tell us that they originally come from the village but they live in Tirana. Their appearance and manners show them to be members of the Albanian capital elite. They tell us that they have relatives in

America, who migrated at the turn of the twentieth century. There is also a group of young people in the restaurant lounging about. When supper is over, we ask for the bill. This is what the receipt said: "Pika Turistike, Vatra Dardhëre."

### *Arrëz*

The next day we set out very early for the journey back. On the crossroad near the mountain pass, before the large steep slope leading to Boboshtice, we turn left following a rusty sign that reads "Arrëz." We go down a difficult, ill-kept road. Here, too, the landscape looks very familiar to me; it is the typical landscape of Mount Grammos, whose peaks I can make out at the distance; it sends shivers down my spine. We go through a beech forest and further down we enter an old oak forest. It seems to be a *vakif* forest (to a religious establishment). This is a holy place, therefore the settlement must be near here. I see a small building which does not appear to be either a chapel or a *tekke*. I will enquire at the village, which now I can make out in a hollow in the distance.

As we approach the settlement we go over a stream. The impression we get on entering the village is the same as Cinicë: small stone houses with black slate roofs. They all boast well-tended yards and gardens. We meet three women who look at us in great wonder. They ask us where we come from and what

we are looking for. When I tell them that we are here because “we felt like it,” they burst out laughing. One of them invites us to her house for coffee. “Later,” I say. Then from the same house a girl comes out; she is well-dressed and wears glasses; she does not seem to be a permanent resident. In fact she is a law student in Tirana and is here for the holidays. She speaks Greek very well; she has lived in Thessaloniki for many years. She tells us that once the village was well-populated, but now most inhabitants have migrated to Greece. She, too, would like to go back, but it is very difficult to obtain a visa. We ask her about the population makeup: are they Christian or Muslim? She says the population is mixed, there are both Christians and Muslims. But this is later denied by what the rest of the inhabitants say; also by the conspicuous absence of a church. The mosque, situated at the centre of the village, was demolished by the previous regime, and a cultural centre was built in its place. I consider the girl’s stance: obviously, knowing that Greeks regard Muslims in a negative way, she did not want to admit to us that the village was Muslim. Isn’t this the reason most Muslim Albanians change their names in Greece, so that they can present themselves as Christian?



*Figure 50. Arrëz: Partial view*



*Figure 51. Arrëz*

This is exactly what the next man we meet on the road has done: “In Greece my name is Notis, here my name is Muslim,” he says, adding: “I changed it because it wasn’t easy to get a job.” Notis has worked in Greece for many years, but now he cannot obtain another visa, so he has to remain at the village. He offers to show us around. He explains to me why people leave. He describes a local economy which has very little to do with market economy. Most people produce what they consume; very few produce for commerce. He himself produces plums, which he sells at the Korçë market, as well as a few vegetables and cereals; he also has a cow and a few sheep and goats which provide the meat and dairy of the year.

Here as in Cinicë the impression of abandonment is very intense. Children run behind us and stare. The village cafe is also newly erected like the one in Cinicë but bigger. We walk around the narrow streets and Notis tells me about his adventures in Greece the first time he was there. I heard such stories during my previous research. They went from the villages on the mountain range of Grammos to Pentalofos via Voio; and after Pentalofos, they would go wherever the road would take them. It was a two-day walk as far as Pentalofos. Once he walked all the way to Veria: it took him eight days. He says he can find his way round those paths blindfolded. I notice that they used the same path which our own muleteers

used to take to go to Korçë before the war. Grammosta - Nikolicë - Arrëz - Drenovë - Korçë: it is the same itinerary back to front. I am deeply moved, remembering my grandmother's stories about going to the Korçë bazaar.

Another man we meet on the way, father of an emigrant, remembers the people from my village passing through... They were always on good terms. He and other people from here used to pass by the Grammos villages on the Greek side. He too seems moved to have met us. He invites us to his house for dinner. "We'll eat whatever we have. It will be a shame for me not to invite you strangers to my home." His son, Pëllumb, who uses the Greek translation of his name, Peristeris, when in Greece, is here this month, helping his father with agricultural work. Many migrants do this: they return in the summer to help with the season's chores: preparing for the winter, storing fodder, splitting wood, etc.) They also help with house repairs. Peristeris works in Attica and is content; his family is there with him. He confirms that all inhabitants are Muslims, adding that this has no particular significance for them. He explains that one of the good things Hoxha did for his country was to eliminate all those discriminations. "For him there were no Christians or Muslims and suchlike; they were all the same." he points out. I ask him if they are Bektashi but his answer is negative. I am impressed that they are not at all interested in rebuilding the village mosque. This, I think, is a difference they have with Christian villages, where the first thing the

inhabitants did after the regime collapsed was to restore the ruined churches or to build new ones.

I ask him if they have some festival or fair or anything similar. He tells me that every year all the villagers have a meeting on the mountain, at that location with the ancient trees and the small building we met on the way. He explains that it is not a festival, and that he does not know if there used to be some sort of sacred place there. Dobra Gora (Good Mountain) is for him just a place where all the people who come from the village, wherever they happen to be, come to meet each other on August 20 every year. For me the landmarks as well as the name of the place itself hint at the presence of some temple, of a place of worship in the past. This is a matter worth looking into...

I leave my friends behind, having decided to take a solitary walk around the village. I walk on the banks of the river Devoll. It is a place which has mythical dimensions for me, probably because of the dance of the same name, which is a special favourite of mine. I must confess that the best rendition of this dance I have ever heard was by Michalis Panousakos, a musician from Konitsa, with origins in Leskovik. I often request this tune from Albanian musicians, but they are more familiar with a faster version called Devollicë. I approach a wood mill. I am impressed by how well and prosperous the business looks. It seems quite productive, judging by the amount of timber stalked in the yard. The owner, a man about

forty, asks me about the purpose of my visit in broken Greek. He tells me that in the past he was worked with livestock breeders on the Greek side – in the animal smuggling business – but they let him down in the transactions. He seems to believe that this is the reason I am there – animal smuggling. He hastens to open his cafe in the village centre; I think he is doing it thinking that I will be more open to him about the purpose of my visit there. However, I tell him very politely that we have to go; he is disappointed, but I take my leave.

Outside the village a gypsy from Bilisht has parked his car and has laid out his merchandise, shoes, waiting for the villagers to come and buy. We go up the road we came from; it is only four kilometres to the crossroad, though when we were coming the road seemed to go on and on forever. On the way down towards Boboshtice we give a lift to two women and a small child, who have set out on foot from Dardhë and are on their way to Korçë. They had come to Dardhë to visit some relatives. We leave them at Boboshtice and take the road to Ersekë.

### On the way to Ersekë

As we go along on the motorway I observe the villages lined up on the left side, on the foot of the mountain. I find it



interesting that there is a tendency to move settlements nearer the motorway, where a great number of new houses are being erected; they must belong to emigrants to Greece, the imitation of Greek models is very obvious. In most villages one can see the church rising in the distance, and once in a while, a minaret.

On the way, we come across a party taking place in a newly-built taverna: people in their Sunday best are dancing to live music. This is a familiar image to me; I have been to many wedding parties like this. However, it is only Thursday afternoon, which would be unusual for a wedding party. I stop to ask what this is about. The owner of the taverna himself approaches us; he informs us it is an engagement party. I observe the dance. It is a quick dance, danced in a somewhat awkward fashion. Again I wonder why when dancers in Greece want to dance to a slow, heavy tune, they request the orchestra to "play Albania" or "as in there" (and they point to the direction of Albania). So far I have never seen any Albanians dance to a slow or heavy tune... The band plays mostly neo-demotic Albanian songs, and some Greek ones. The taverna proprietor invites us to stay. He does not speak any Greek. When I tell him I am Vlach, he says: "Wait a minute," and he introduces his Vlach wife. She is a typical Arvanite Vlach in appearance and speech: the familiar accent... She tells me that many Vlachs live in the neighbouring villages. We don't stay long; after a short talk we take our leave of them and go on our way.

*Vithkuq*

On the way to Ersekë, I observe the plains of Korçë. It is obvious that people are trying to rally after the shock of the regime collapsing and to make a new life for themselves. However, the plain still has the appearance of a half-deserted place. We reach the crossroad to Vithkuq. I cannot resist the temptation. For me, among all Albanian places, Vithkuq is a mythical place; I could not say why. Looking at the map I see that it is only 15 kilometres away. I do not think twice: I turn right and go up a bare hill with a panoramic view of the plain. There is a hydroelectric plant ahead in the distance, operating with water brought from the mountain by means of large conduits. It seems that this water irrigates the Korçë plain. A little further up we come across an artificial lake gathering the water before it is channelled to the power plant. There is a strong mark of state intervention on this landscape: the previous regime was very proud of such projects.

We bypass the lake. We come across herds of goats. It is noon already. We go past a village by the end of a stream to our left, and we go up a climbing road. We discern Vithkuq in the distance: it seems to be a large settlement, sprawled on hills, buried in lush foliage. As we approach I can see little gardens, orchards and abundant waters. There is a large number of sacred buildings; roadside chapels and churches everywhere. Set against the orgy of vegetation and running

waters are the grey, almost deserted buildings of the previous regime, and a general feeling of desolation. Leaving behind the symbolic village centre erected by the old regime, we enter the old settlement, whose traditional stone buildings and beauty take our breath away. There are stone houses everywhere, with beautiful, well-kept courtyards. On the outskirts of the settlement there is a fenced landscape of fields dedicated to cultivating plants mainly for fodder (clover, barley, etc.)

I speak to everyone we meet on our way. They tell me that all the inhabitants are Christians, and that there are three neighbourhoods in the village, one of them called Greka. I give a lift to a woman and her grandchild; they are going to their house near the church of the Archangel Michael, right at the end of the "Greek" neighbourhood. We stop in front of the church. The gate is open, but not the front door. However, one can enter from a side door; that side of the church is ruined. We enter. I feel cold chills down my spine. There is wealth of inestimable value here, all exposed and unprotected. There are no icons on the iconostasis here either. The murals are abandoned to the ravages of time and decay. It is impossible to bear the sight. I leave the place feeling devastated. I notice that on the new iron gate door there is the name of a privately-owned company from Korçë, which donated it. My happiness to see Vithkuq is counterbalanced by my deep sadness for the condition of this church.

We go down the road towards the exit of the village and back to the road where we came from. As we approach a nearby river I notice a sign denoting the presence of a fish farm on the left. I turn to that direction, parallel to the river. All along the road by the riverbank I admire the small fodder producing fields. There is a variety of mainly hydrophilous shrubs and trees on the banks, the mountain willow prevailing. At the end of the road, instead of the expected fish farm we see a *nerotrivi* (industrial washing drum operated by water) in operation: some shag carpets are being washed; the water comes from the direction of the settlement. The afternoon heat is so intense that I cannot restrain myself from jumping in the water. The place is deserted...

### *Leshnjë*

We stay there for about an hour and then we go back. On the way towards the Korçë - Ersekë motorway, after a short detour, we stop at a village on the right. It is the village Leshnjë. On entering the village, we are impressed by the sight of huts made of wood and thatch. The main part of the village is a typical agro-pastoral settlement: plain houses with pretty courtyards, teeming with people and movement at this time of the year, since agricultural activities are at their peak.



*Figure 52. Farmers' huts*

We stop at the middle of the village; there is a beautiful public pump next to a big walnut tree, and beside them a new building which looks like a cafe. There are two girls washing wheat grain under the pump. Our presence stimulates the curiosity of neighbours and passers-by: within a few minutes people of all ages surround us. We ask them if we could have

a cup of coffee. They reply that we could have one, at the cafe. A ten-year-old child prepares it for us; he is one of a large group of children who surround us looking with curiosity and cracking jokes. The boy's father has gone to town. The boy draws a table in the shade of the walnut tree and brings us the coffee. Afterwards we order *raki*. There are already three villagers sitting with us by that time; they order beer. One of them is the headman. Only one of them, the youngest, speaks Greek; he is an emigrant to Greece; he lives and works at a manufacture in Ambelonas, near Larissa. He is here now because he is building himself a house in the village. We discuss his life in Greece. He is happy with it: he works eight hours a day; he has got social security and humane work conditions. The headman seems to be a quiet, hardworking man. He tells us that he does odd jobs to scrape a living for himself and his family: as a headman he receives a salary of 20 euros per month, he tells us smiling. I am impressed by him: he radiates optimism. Our talk is very pleasant, full of jokes. An old man joins us; he says he is an admirer of Enver Hoxha and feels nostalgia for the past. He asserts he is proud to be a communist. He invites us to stay at the village and offers us hospitality in his house. He banters with us for a while and then leaves; he has work to do at his fields. Presently the third man in the company brings us a plate of honey and feta cheese from his house, to accompany our drinks. We stay long under the shady walnut tree, and we leave for Ersekë late in the

afternoon. As we leave the Korçë region, I am thinking that I must come back here on the 6th of August for the religious festival, and attend the liturgy celebrating the Transfiguration of the Saviour in the Vlach church of Shën Sotiri.

## 14

### SHËN SOTIRI

#### *Vlach matters*

Aristidis, Alexis and Kosmas walked towards the cafe. All three of them had set out together from Kastoria to Korçë that morning. Alexis was the obsessive type; in Athens and in his home town many people called him a maniac. He wanted to prove that the active support of Greece would help the Greek community of Korçë and the neighbouring regions on their way to liberation and free expression. There was no official response to his efforts and he went on alone. Only later did he realise how many obstacles were placed in front of him. He had not remotely imagined this when he began to contact the Greeks and Albanians of Korçë and Ersekë. All this,

instead of bringing him down to his knees, steeled his will. Kosmas had set up a small business in Korçë, manufacturing clothes. He had proved that investment in Albania was an easy thing; the car was his, too, and he had offered it for the visit to Ersekë and the surrounding villages. They decided to begin by visiting the villages in the poorest province. They wanted to see the reactions of the inhabitants, Greek and Vlach, of the remotest, more isolated communities: the authoritarianism of the old regime had more chances of surviving there.

They walked into a cafe somewhat cautiously; a few tables about to fall apart, chairs in a similar state, walls bare and unpainted; further off a countertop with only a few glasses on it, a young man behind it. They greeted him in Greek.

Soon a man walked in; he was about forty, of average height, with a polite expression on his face but there was also something hard bitten about him. He looked the resolute type. He introduced himself.

"I am Alcibiadis... the headman."

"I am Aristidis... from Greece." He managed to communicate in Vlach, though he didn't speak it well: he tried hard to remember what Vlach was spoken at home when he was a child. His mother almost never spoke Vlach to him; it was always Greek. However, he used to listen to the shepherds and the neighbours when they talked with his mother and his family. He went out with the flocks sometimes, he slept in the hut, and that's where mostly Vlach was spoken. Now, forty years later, he realised he remembered quite a lot. The headman seemed quite pleased that a Greek was in their village, for the first time. He opened his heart to them; he spoke to them in Vlach. So far it was only relatives from nearby Greek villages or emigrants to America and Australia who had come to offer much needed help: this is how they survived that first harsh winter.

They talked at length about their difficulties, about the disintegration of everything around them. They uttered the important phrase: "him frats" ("We are brothers"). They hugged each other.



Everybody drank “to their health”; Alexis was talking to Yianni in his broken Greek. Then the headman said to Aristidis:

“Beware of him, he’s Bulgarian.”

Aristidis made a hasty sign to Alexis, who caught it, but went on talking, pretending insouciance (...)

Alcibiadis was telling him about what they had been through; imprisonment, exile.

“We were persecuted not only when we spoke Greek – this was the case even when Ahmet Zogu and the Italians were in power – but also when we spoke Vlach. The communists understood that our speaking Vlach meant we showed our opposition to the regime and our allegiance to the Greeks”.

Aristidis was shaking his head; he did not know what to say.

Soon they heard the distant sound of gunshots; but Alcibiades was talking about his own adventures and he did not want to interrupt him.

“Did you spent many years in prison?”

“Eight in a row, not counting exile.”

He asks him if the Vlachs have formed an association.

“There is an association in Korçë, they have a chairman too”. He said he wished to meet him; Alcibiadis nodded and said he would write down the man’s address in Korçë. He asked someone at a nearby table and was told that the man was in Romania now, and then he would go to Athens.

“I’ll meet him there then’, Aristidis said. “What is he doing in Romania?”

“He is with the propaganda people; he often travels there.”

“And you follow him?”

“We have no dealings with them. We are Greek. Nobody from the villages follows him; he’s only got a few in the city.”

“Say it, brother”, Aristidis says and hugs him. They remain like this for a while, hugging each other, tears in their eyes.

“I was afraid you would be for the propaganda, that’s why I was cautious at first; but now I see”, he said and held his hand.

“We run them out of town whenever they come here; none of them dares set a foot in the village; they run them out of the Korçë villages too. But there are some in the city; they receive money from Romania, from somewhere else, we don’t know exactly. We Vlachs are all Greek; we shout it out loud, we are not afraid.”

Aristidis did not know what to say; they spoke through their hands and through their tearful eyes.

“They pressed us very hard – not everybody in the same degree, but particularly me, being the headman, and others – to attend the convention of Vlachs in Tirana three months ago. They told us not to let the Greek Vlachs speak, and to shout that Vlachs are not Greek. We did the opposite: as soon as some people from the villages of Avlona requested that the Greeks speak too, we shouted along with them. We shouted, and then we applauded them; I remember particularly the mayor of Metsovo. Since then, I and the others have been blacklisted. We had come to an understanding with people in Greece to send the mayor to the Metsovo convention, together with the others, those who shouted. The people from Metsovo knew Vlachs from the Avlona villages; they went to them and took them along, to have them standing by to protest if [the Greeks] were not given the opportunity to speak. I had spoken to some of them myself; we Vlachs from all over the place agreed on it. That’s why it worked.”

Aristidis remembered all this; he had experienced it personally in Athens. He said no more; he couldn’t speak.

A few minutes passed in silence; it seemed to them a long time; it looked as if they had nothing to say. Aristides broke the silence; he had noticed some men go in and out of the cafe, and he remembered the gunshots.

“Anything happened? I heard gunshots before...”

“No, nothing; it was just some of our people who went to the cemetery and shot their guns.”

“To the cemetery? Why?”

“Our parents had asked us to do it; they said when the Greeks arrived, we were to go to the cemetery and shoot, so that they could hear it and rejoice” (Timenos 1993:13-19).

Excerpts of that text, written by Timenos (pen name of a Vlach journalist) and similar, spring to mind as I go through the checkpoint of Krystallopigi on August 5, 2005; it is the eve of the religious festival for the Transfiguration of the Saviour.

### *An anthropologist's testimony*

I think also of the studies by the anthropologist Stephanie Schwander-Sievers on the Vlachs of Korçë; those studies were based on fieldwork she carried out in that region. I cite a few excerpts:

In the early post-Communist transition period a vivid Aromanian ethnic movement emerged in Albania. The slumber of a sleeping beauty nation ended, and it became part of a recent pan-Balkan initiative. In 1997, the Union for Aromanian language and Culture (*Union für aromuniische Sprache und Kultur*), based in Freiburg, Germany and led by the wellknown diaspora activist Vasile Barba, succeeded in leading the parliamentary Assembly of The Council of Europe to formulate a recommendation for the protection of Aromanian culture and language in its host countries [Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly AACR 18.7]. However, this decision was made without Greek participation.[...]

If a failed Aromanian national movement and a more or less forced homogenisation process in Communist Albania have led to their

assimilation, certain questions arise: why and how did Aromanian ethnicity emerge with political transition in Albania? Can the re-emergence of Aromanian identity be seen as the result of transition, i.e. of reprivatisation, the new freedom of religion, the emergence of party politics, globalization, or some other innovations in society? [...]

I would like to argue that the Albanian Aromanians' new emphasis on their identity can be seen as a pragmatic strategy to adjust to successes or failures in the Albanian political transition and also to globalization. I would like to stress that, today, it is exactly the revitalization of the conflict between followers of a pro-Greek and a pro-Romanian identification that serves to broaden the scope of options for potential exploitation. In constructing antagonistic discourses mirroring Romanian or, respectively, Greek world-views, Albanian Aromanians manage to secure the future of their offspring and to create new social positions for themselves. [...]

Leading figures of both Aromanian association factions accuse each other of abusing their position by taking money from the candidates. People in the villages told me that "with poor people you can do what you want". They argued that the poor would sign anything and with any faction if it could help them progress. There is also evidence (although no one would confess to this) that leaders from both factions switched their orientation in the last few years and had their children study first in Greece, but then in Romania, and vice versa. There is also, of course, a very emotional bond and strong identification respectively with either the Romanian or the Greek state in cases where help had already been received, as witnessed by temporary returnees to the villages. When a new ethnicity had proven helpful in every-day life and contributed to boosting pride, emotional attachments developed.

Finally, Aromanian identity is not always and everywhere of relevance. It is normally referred to when it is a disadvantage. Apparently, Albanian Aromanian people of high social status in modern Albanian society, and this includes many well known scholars, politicians

and artists, tend not to engage in Aromanian ethnic politics. Under no circumstances at all would some admit to their Aromanian family background. [...] Summarising the key points, I would like to stress that there is utilization of identities as well as emotions with regard to these identities. In this there is a generation gap. The older generation was able to refer to an old mode of Aromanian identity when there was no social order and structure immediately after the breakdown of the Communist regime. They also felt a certain nostalgia remembering old Aromanian identity features from their pre- or early Communist past, and now they also utilize identity politics for social positions, reputation, psychological compensation for an inferiority complex, economic advantages, and, most importantly, to secure future opportunities for their children. The younger people seem not to care very much about Aromanian identity in terms of its symbolic meaning, but also utilize it to gain better opportunities for jobs and education. Emotional attachment may appear after having received benefits.

In conclusion, the evidence strongly suggests that Albanian Aromanians' globalizing identity confers an advantage to them over nonAromanian Albanians. By renouncing a local identification in favour of one associated with more powerful states (Romania and Greece), that is, associated with ideas distant in space and time and therefore mythical and unchallengeable they create access to scarce social, economic, political and cultural resources while profiting from new opportunities in the Albanian transition process. Besides creating a sense of exclusivity, they are able to shift identities in various situations, referring to the preCommunist situation if opportune. This flexibility is an efficient and profitable strategy of adjustment to different circumstances. It is undoubtedly not unique to the Albanian case. In contrast to essentialist assumptions, I want to stress that it is the flexibility that makes people strong everywhere (Schwandner-Sievers 2002:149-157).

*And a Vlach's point of view*

It also brings to my mind various scenes from the first year after the fall of the Albanian regime, when various circles of Greek Vlachs tried to penetrate into Albania in many ways in order to influence the Vlach community towards a positive approach to Greece. Here I can mention a meeting I had with certain members of the Pan-Hellenic Union of Vlach Cultural Associations, on their initiative, with the purpose of following them to a trip to Albania, where they would meet with Vlach groups and associations, in view of the international Vlach convention programmed to take place in Tirana soon afterwards. I left that meeting deeply disappointed, shocked even, because of this one phrase I heard and which was etched deeply into my memory: somebody, in his efforts to persuade me to go to Albania with them for the fulfilment of the "sacred" cause, told me, with a meaningful look: "We can take them on our side for a loaf of bread". After that, I could not utter a single word...

Since I mentioned that convention, about which so much has been said and heard, concerning conflicts, disputes, etc. between various groups and factions, I am tempted to cite an excerpt from the report of a well-known Vlach of the diaspora, who participated in the convention, representing an organisation from the USA:

In 1991, when the fog of totalitarian rule finally lifted from Albania, the Vlachs there were permitted to organize an ethnic society. The first conference of this new society was scheduled for April 5th, 1992, but my father had died fifteen years before, so it was left to me to complete the circle.[...]

I woke up early Sunday morning, eager to see what would happen at the Vlach conference. The Albanian government had been kind enough to lend us a large auditorium in Tirana University. As Victor and I walked there, we met many people we knew on the street. The hall was packed with hundreds of people, and every country and faction was represented. The Vlachs have been in a precarious position as an ethnic group since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, when we were divided among Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia. Too few and geographically dispersed to even consider having our own state, we were claimed by Greece, to which we are linked culturally, and Romania, to which we are linked linguistically. This tug-of-war for our loyalties lasted from about 1860 until 1945, when the post-war Romanian communist regime decided to give up on us. With the overthrow of Romanian communism in 1989, however, the Greek-versus-Romanian debate resumed, joined by a third group that holds that we are neither Greek nor Romanian but just Vlach citizens of whichever state we happen to live in.

Meanwhile, our numbers have continued to dwindle. At the turn of the century, two British scholars who studied the Vlachs estimated our population at 500,000. The most recent survey, a book written in 1989 by another British academic, Dr. Tom Winnifrith – a scholar who has had a lifelong fascination with the Vlachs – figured the number of Vlachs at perhaps 50,000. But that was before Albania was opened up to western eyes.

Like everything else in the Balkans, population statistics are tied to history; indeed, if the peoples of the Balkans ever succeed in destroying one another, the cause of death can be listed in just one word: history.

And only history can explain the question of Vlach population statistics. Albania was created just before the first World War and saved from dismemberment just after it by Woodrow Wilson, of all people. Serbia and Montenegro felt the northern part of the country belonged to them; Italy considered Albania its special colony in the Balkans; while Greece claimed southern Albania, which it began to call "Northern Epirus" as if a region by that name had always existed. Everyone has since given up on these claims except some extremist Greeks who are in any case not supported by their government. The basis of their argument is the Greek minority in Albania, known in Greece as Northern Epirotes. But when they reckon the number of their minority in Albania, Greek nationalists sometimes count *all* the Orthodox, regardless of whether they are Greek, Vlach, or Albanian.

Today, the Greeks claim to have anywhere from 50,000 to 350,000 compatriots within Albania. Several Vlachs in Albania told me that there are only 50-100,000 Greeks, while there are 200-300,000 Vlachs. I honestly do not know whom to believe, and conditions being as they are in Albania, it will be some time before a reliable census is taken. Only one thing is for sure: even together, Vlachs and Greeks today comprise a rather small portion of Albania's population.

The conference of the Albanian Vlachs began in an orderly way. Since people from the village of Selenitsa provided the main impetus for the creation of an ethnic society, they predominated on the board, which was seated at a dais on the stage of the auditorium. There were even a few women, and goodwill was evident everywhere. But the dynamics of a traditional society are very simple: traditions, rituals, and customs bring a modicum of order to an otherwise chaotic world. Say we are living in a village hidden way up in the Pindus mountains, out of the reach of any civilization or law; what is to prevent me from killing you, raping your daughter, or stealing all your livestock? The consensus afforded by tradition – that's all. It's the only thing that keeps the lid on such a society; and when the lid starts to blow, watch out. As we all know, it blows rather



often on this peninsula. Maybe this has something to do with the mobility of the modern world: it is possible, though difficult, to keep an entire village hewing to the same tradition, but imagine the problems when you meet people from another village, or another region, or another country, or another continent, whose traditions do not match your own? All of a sudden, the lid no longer fits.

So the Vlach conference worked splendidly for as long as a consensus was maintained, and then it spun quickly out of control. Once these meetings go out of control, they assume the nature of a bidding war: Someone on the stage says something that so unnerves a member of the audience that the latter feels he must stand up in his seat and disagree; hearing shouts of approval from the audience, another person is emboldened to stand up and outbid the fellow before him with an even more radical idea (or a more radical statement of the same idea); and so on. Such meetings offer a flash of insight into the process of radicalization at times of chaos – all of a sudden, you see before you not Costa and Spiru, but Danton and Robespierre, or Trotsky and Lenin. I am filled with awe for the achievement of modern institutions like political parties, the U.S. House of Representatives, the Society Farsharotul, or even whole countries, which manage to stay together by creating a consensus for a new tradition.

The pro-Romanian faction had prepared itself well and the speaking program included the Romanian ambassador to Albania, who spoke of the Vlachs and Romanians as “one people”; a Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan who promised to build churches for the Vlachs; and a Romanian Senator from Transylvania whose nationalist party enjoys the support of many hardline members of the Vlach emigrant community in Romania. But while the Romanians either spoke in Albanian or required translators from Romanian into Vlach, the Greeks had the presence of mind to see that their delegation was entirely Vlach (led by the Mayor of Metsovo, the largest Vlach town in Greece) and spoke our language perfectly. The loudest incident of the day occurred when the Romanian

Ambassador was allowed to speak before the Mayor of Metsovo, which was considered a grievous insult by the Greek Vlachs – “How could you put that foreigner before *un di a nostru* (one of our own)?” The entire Greek delegation staged a noisy protest at the foot of the stage, drowning out the Romanian ambassador until they were promised that the Mayor of Metsovo would be the very next speaker. This man, Aleko Kakrimani, spoke so eloquently, succinctly, and non-politically about the bonds between Greek and Albanian Vlachs that he almost brought the house down (it didn’t hurt that people from Metsovo speak a particularly melodic version of our language).

Although pro-Greeks and pro-Romanians later engaged in more bitter polemics outside the conference hall, it turned out that they were little more than a sideshow, for the vast majority of Vlachs in Albania think of themselves as neither Greek nor Romanian but simply as Vlach citizens of Albania. I found this everywhere I went, even in Korçë, where at the turn of this century emotions had run strongest on both sides, pro-Greek and pro-Romanian. The leadership of the Albanian Vlach Society has followed this non-partisan line despite pressures and blandishments, earning if nothing else the goodwill of the Albanian government, which would no doubt view the Vlachs differently were a nearby state to claim their loyalty. And by repeatedly emphasizing this position, these leaders skilfully kept their conference on track despite all the fireworks.

I have by now served on enough boards and attended enough conferences to know that the most important work often takes place before or after the regularly scheduled activities, usually at the luncheons and repasts that accompany such events. The Vlach conference was no different; after the formalities were concluded, we walked back to the Hotel Arbëria for a banquet that is lavish by many standards, especially those of Albania in early 1992. It was there that I got to meet everyone face-to-face; it was there also that most of the real deals were made and schemes hatched.

There were some bright spots, like Orthodox Archbishop Anastas, who spoke very openly about letting the Vlachs celebrate the liturgy in their own language, a position never before heard from a Greek prelate. There were also some dark spots, like the attempt to create a “Balkan Federation of Vlach Societies” without the Greek Vlachs – indeed, without any semblance of a democratic debate (the discussion was held behind closed doors by “intellectuals”, the second most dangerous class of human beings in the Balkan Peninsula after men in general). I found out about the meeting quite by accident, went into the room, and stood alone against excluding the Greeks; the consensus was damaged and it soon ruptured on another issue. A bidding war began, no new consensus was achieved, and the meeting broke up when someone made the face-saving comment, “We get fired up and all of a sudden we want to do everything under the sun in one day”. The banquet ended with many a warm embrace and a few cold stares... (Balamaci 1993:8-11)

All this recalls the conditions in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Except oppositions and conflicts in those days were bloody. The consummation of national identities through national state formations was based on human sacrifices. The founding of national constructions, it seems, had to follow the known Balkan mythical motif about cementing stability through human sacrifice. All this recalls descriptions of European travellers in the Balkans. But we need not resort to them to represent the atmosphere of the era. The same writer of the above passages, in the same text, describes scenes of his family life, which are absolutely typical.

[My father] also told me over and over about an Albanian “revolution”, but this confused me because it wasn’t like the American revolution; I learned much later in graduate school that this relatively

minor incident in the overall scheme of international affairs took place during a period of near-anarchy in Albania between the start of the Balkan Wars in 1912 and the end of World War I in 1918. This “revolution”, however, was the defining moment of his life – indeed, the defining moment in the life of most of the members of his clan: the cold-blooded murder in 1914 of his father’s first cousins, the priest Haralambis Balamaci and his brother Sotir, by pro-Greek nationalists in Korçë.

The Balamacis are part of a large Vlach tribe known as Farsharots. Like so many other aspects of Vlach history, the source of this title is uncertain; it is thought to come from the Albanian town of Frashari, but it is not clear that the tribe was ever based there. Haralambie Balamaci (also known by the honorific title Papa Lambru) was born in 1863, one of a number of priests in the Balamaci family. He had been raised in Greek Orthodoxy (a Greek church was built in Pliassa in 1801), but in 1860 the Romanian government, motivated as much by romantic nationalism as by the need for more chips in its bid to become a player in Balkan power politics, had begun its campaign to bring the Vlachs under its influence by building churches and schools for them in and around the Vlach heartland of Macedonia, which was then still under Ottoman control. The Balamacis were among the strongest clan in their community, largely because of the great wealth in sheep possessed by Haralambie’s uncle, Spiru Balamaci; once they were won over to the Romanian cause, almost the entire Farsharot tribe came with them.

Haralambie renounced the Greek church and began to celebrate the liturgy in Romanian, which he and others believed was the Vlachs’ “literary language”. This upset the local Greeks and pro-Greek Vlachs and Albanians greatly. When the Ottomans ceded Thessaly to Greece in 1881, many Albanian Vlachs were cut off from their winter pastures by the border change; Papa Lambru joined his uncle Spiru in a Vlach delegation that lodged a protest with the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul. This upset the proGreek Vlachs and Albanians of Korçë still more and ten years later,

when Papa Lambru again travelled to Istanbul, this time to request the creation of a Romanian Episcopate in Vlach regions, an attempt was made on his life.

This was the period of a savage guerilla war between pro-Greek and pro-Bulgarian forces over who would get Macedonia once the Turks inevitably pulled out. In southern Albania, the pro-Romanians tended to side with the pro-Bulgarians against the Greeks. (I am told there were very few ethnic Greeks in Korçë, though there were enough pro-Greek Vlachs and Albanians to sustain a Greek Orthodox Cathedral there. There were definitely no ethnic Romanians.) Tensions grew between pro-Greeks and pro-Romanians. In 1905 the Greeks sent a band of guerillas led by a pro-Greek Vlach named Gouda to Pliassa to discourage the use of a Romanian liturgy in the church named Saint Mary (in Vlach, *S'ta Maria*); he burned the liturgy books, but worship in Romanian continued. In 1906, the Greek Bishop of Korçë, Fotios, decided to visit Pliassa and personally change the language of the liturgy from Romanian to Greek. He was warned not to go and was stoned when he arrived, which so enraged him that he excommunicated Papa Lambru and all of his supporters. Papa Lambru went directly to Pliassa and held a service in Romanian to rally his people and then he bought a house in Korçë and started his own Romanian school there. In retaliation, Fotios barred all pro-Romanian Vlachs from the Greek church in Korçë; Papa Lambru promptly began holding services in the house, in Romanian, galling Fotios still more.

Later that year, Fotios was assassinated by a Vlach named Thanas Nastu, who escaped to Romania. Turkish authorities rounded up several Balamacis and put them in jail but were unable to link them to the crime. In 1908 the new Greek bishop of Korçë repeated the rite of excommunication, but the victory of the Young Turks in the same year and their repression of all Balkan ethnic groups alike led those groups to unite in a final revolution against Turkish rule in the peninsula. The Balkan Wars of 1912-13 prised most of Turkey in Europe away from the Ottomans but although the Greeks

won much of Macedonia, they also desired southern Albania (“Northern Epirus”). Greek troops occupied the region and the local pro-Greek faction was ecstatic, fully expecting union with Greece. But the mysterious ways of Great Power politics defied their expectations, and in the middle of March 1914 they learned that Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos had concluded an agreement with the Powers wherein Greece gave up its claim to southern Albania and instead received the Aegean Islands (Chios, Mytilene, and others). Greek troops were to withdraw from Albania by March 31st.

In the months before, Papa Lambru’s life had been threatened several times. Albania was in a state of near-anarchy, and he had become a virtual prisoner in his own household, afraid to come out even to shop. The pro-Greek faction of Korçë detested him and when they saw that, partly as a result of his efforts, their cause was being lost, their anger no longer knew any bounds and they cried out for his blood. Early on the morning of March 23rd, 1914, a group of some 60 armed men surrounded the house where Papa Lambru and his brother Sotir lived with their families. They shouted that if the priest did not come outside, they would burn down the house. Papa Lambru came out, followed by Sotir, who refused to leave his brother’s side. Their pockets were emptied and the contents replaced with pictures of Fotios, the assassinated Greek Bishop. The two brothers were marched to a piece of high ground just below the Orthodox church of St. Elia (called *Shin d’Ili* in Vlach, a corruption of the Albanian *Shën Ilia*). Sotir’s wife and son followed at a distance. Along the way, Papa Lambru and Sotir were kicked, beaten, tortured, and stabbed. When they neared *Shin d’Ili*, they were tied to trees and shot dead. Their bruised and bulletriddled bodies were kept on display there for three days... (Balamaci 1993:15-17).

Such things come to my mind throughout the day, as we visit various villages in the area of Bilisht. Next morning we go to the Vlach church to attend the holy service.

### *The mass*

This is a special day for the Vlach community in Korçë, I understand. I do not know if this is the case for the whole of the community, but at least those I have talked to about this matter do believe it. In any case, a lot of people are already assembled in the church and everything looks as if this is going to a very important event, indeed. Even though the new church building is not completely finished, today is, basically, its official inauguration. Leading the service is the Bishop of Korçë, Ioannis, and several other priests, together with the Vlach priest Christo. Entering the church I realise it is already packed and the atmosphere is truly celebratory.

Of course, my information about the Holy Service today taking place in the Vlach language proves wrong. In a later visit, however, I discovered that the liturgy is nowadays in the Vlach language. I have in my possession the text of the liturgy (Gura 1967).

Today it is in Albanian, except for a few phrases and some passages chanted by the Vlach priest in Vlach. I ask the person next to me discretely about this, and he answers that it is

because most of them do not speak Vlach and that quite a few Albanians are among them, as well. The Bishop is rather young, around forty. I learn he is Muslim on the side of his father and Christian on his mother's side. He was christened and studied for ten whole years in the U.S.A. I am especially impressed by the piety of the people participating, as they very often repeat in chorus stereotypical phrases or even known passages of the liturgy, which I never noticed happening in any of the Albanian services I have partaken till now. In the end of the liturgy the Bishop performs his preaching and Holy Communion follows and the offer of boiled wheat and Holy Bread in small plastic cups. Some young people are taking videos of the whole event, while the conversations of the faithful are in both the Vlach and the Albanian languages.

### *An interview*

As I come out of the church, I start a conversation with two men. We get to know each other better, they want to know more about us, too. They offer to buy us coffee in the nearby cafe. We order raki. I ask whether I can record the discussion, they agree and, moreover, seem quite happy about this encounter. Our discussion takes place mainly in Vlach, from time to time we switch to Greek for the sake of my partner, but



they find it difficult, despite the fact that they have lived and worked in Greece.

If I wanted to sum up our conversation, I would start by saying that, above all, I have the impression they were totally sincere with me. In no way did they try to present themselves as Greeks, as [Vlachs have done] in many other cases, and neither did they try to overbid for some form of patriotism. Sharing their reflections about their Vlach origin and identity, they used the expression that the Vlachs in the Balkans are like oil in water (*ka untulemou pi apa*): Drops here and there and the question is where these drops come from. Their talk often moves to Pliasa (Plasë) and Moshopoli (Voskopojë), as important places for the Vlachs of Albania and not only. They talk to us about the old nomadic relocations that knew no borders, but also about migration to Romania in the first decades of the twentieth century. They are obviously aware of both the fluidity of identities and their negotiation on the basis of the conditions each time and the assessment of what was beneficial for them each time. Their basic point is that, in the last analysis, one adjusts and belongs where one lives and “eats bread”. They themselves have their children in Greece, they all have a Greek passport as well, while one of them has his daughter in Romania where she is studying on a Romanian government scholarship. They do not hide the fact that they make use of “two cards”, the Greek and the Romanian, to their benefit, as they do not hide a generally pragmatist attitude

regarding the issue of national integration. They talk to us very positively about Greece, about the pension they hope to receive from it, about their children who are just fine living there and their grandchildren who speak only Greek; but they also talk about the presence of the Romanian Ambassador from Tirana in the celebratory liturgy of Shën Sotiri and the other financial provisions of Romania, such as the scholarships for children of Vlach origin. The discussion reminds me of a similar one with some elderly people in the village Drenovë, a few kilometres away from Korçë, who were telling me that when in Albania they show their Albanian passport and in Greece the Greek one... I even remember one of them who had worked years in Greece telling me that he would show a photo of his in kilt and playing the clarinet (which he used to do in the time of the Hoxha, partaking in festivals as a musician) and this was the best passport! He mentions as a typical example waiting in line to get a residence permit and the moment he shows the photograph the person in charge gives him priority... In the music groups he used to participate as an Albanian, of course, but in Greece both the clarinet and the kilt are exclusively symbols of the Greek identity.

### *The Romanian propaganda*

The above issue has especially preoccupied me since the first moment I came to contact with the Vlachs of Albania. I met several parents who mentioned the fact that their children are studying in Romania on Romanian government scholarships. I even met cases of families who had one child studying in Romania and the other in Greece on similar scholarships. The phenomenon has apparently acquired significant proportions, as both countries are employing policies aiming at the affiliation of the particular group. As regards Greece, the situation is well known; the Vlachs of Albania are considered Hellenes and enjoy all the relative privileges. Regarding Romania, it appears that after the collapse of the communist regime, it has revitalised its politics of the past, considering the Vlachs part of the Romanian diaspora.

As I was meeting more and more young people who, making use of their real or supposed Vlach origin, study in Romania on scholarships, I searched for more evidence about this matter. All you have to do is visit the website of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discover that the Vlachs are considered Romanians of the diaspora and enjoy all the relative privileges. We copy, then, from the law in question:

Article 1. The Romanian state supports the development of bonds with Romanians everywhere, for the purpose of the preservation and strengthening of their national, language and religious identity, with respect to the legislation of the countries where they belong.

Article 2. The law standardises:

The rights of persons of freely defined Romanian origin, who, being Romanian citizens, ex-Romanian citizens, descendants of Romanians or speaking one of the dialects of the Romanian language as mother-tongue, and who, for various reasons, live, for the time being, outside the state borders of Romania. These persons are going to be called from now on “the everywhere Romanians”.

In the spirit of the present law, the term “everywhere Romanians” (independently of the actual name: rumani, vlahi, valahi, macedoromani, aromani, meglaromani, istroromani, moldoveni) denotes those persons of freely defined Romanian origin, who... are living, for the time being, outside the state borders of Romania

(<http://www.mae.ro/index.php?und=doc&id=29228> , 20-10-2008)

So, if someone secures a document from a Vlach association that confirms his Vlach origin, he is immediately considered “a Romanian of the diaspora” by the Romanian government and enjoys all the pertinent privileges that are granted by the law. The same holds, after all, with the Greek side: If some one provides the relevant documentation of his Vlach origin, he is considered a Hellene by the Greek state. The situation is, of course, reflected in the fact that two categories of associations exist on the Albanian terrain, one proGreek and one pro-Romanian, whose members, moreover, may alternate their registration, which is something that even their leaders may do, depending on their orientation each time. The two associations, however, are in bad terms and the clashes between them many (Schwandner-Sievers 2002).

The above issue is so complex and the research ground in this field generally so slippery, that I hesitate, for the time being, to “go deep” into it. Moreover, I have not attempted to investigate the matter of the Vlach identity systematically in Greece either, though here things are clearer and no political controversy exists, in my view, regarding the “Vlach question”. In my Ph.D. I did not get involved with this subject, since my focus was other. For the time being, then, I confine myself to the presentation of an early paper about the Vlachs of Greece, which was delivered in the *Third European Conference of Modern Greek Studies*, (Bucharest, 2-4 June 2006).



## 15.

THE VLACHS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE  
BORDER. NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND CUL-  
TURAL ASSIMILATION

In the early nineteenth century the differing linguistic groups among the Orthodox Christians in the region showed considerable solidarity. As the linguistically based nationalist programme spread through Europe with the associated attempt to resurrect earlier kingdoms as nation-states, serious conflict arose with heterophone Orthodox who rejected assimilation. The area of sharper confrontation was Macedonia. Here, most Vlachs, who called themselves "Aroumanoi" and shared the Romaic background and commercial proclivities of many Greek speakers, preferred the Hellenic state to the alternatives. Even so, however, some were attracted by linguistic affinity to Romania, despite its distance.

The above quotation is from the article "Greek identity: A long view", by C. Carras, which is included in the volume

*Balkan Identities* that was edited recently by M. Todorova Carras 2004:320).

It is, indeed, true that with the dissolution of the multiethnic Ottoman Empire and the expansion in the Balkans of the modern national phenomenon, the search for factors that would differentiate the Orthodox ethnic groups between them (groups that were previously identified, to a large degree, on the basis of the *millet* system), was focused mainly on the language, that was, after all, a relatively safe “objective” criterion and also suitable for classifications in the context of the general national project; the latter was based considerably on “language nationalism”, any way. The effort of the Greek side to preserve the identification of Hellenism with Orthodoxy (Matalas 2002), apart from provoking in other Balkan Churches nationalist moves of seceding from the “Hellenic oriented” Ecumenical Patriarchate, it also provoked other types of reactions by ethnic groups, who developed their own, distinct national movement with the ultimate purpose of constructing a nation state. This was the case with most of the ethnic groups, which developed their own national narratives in a stereotypical manner, on the line of the “national awakening or renaissance” dogma, in the framework of which the cultivation of a unitary national language and national literature was a basic concern (Mazower 2002; Prevelakis 2001; Todorova 2004; Kitromilidis 1997).



The Vlachs, in the context of these processes, present a very interesting divergence. If we accept the evolutionary scheme, according to which, in the modern times, and as national ideals develop, previously ethnic groups demand their transformation into national ones via national state formations, this, in the case of the Vlachs, never happened. The discussion of how and why the case is so is long and difficult, so much so that it would be naive to think we could address this issue here.

We shall attempt, therefore, to examine the cultural dimensions of the inclusion in the Greek nation-state, of the Vlachs who were living on Greek ground, and their subsequent gradual assimilation. Our theoretical approach is that of social and cultural anthropology, dealing with its subject in a holistic manner, namely rejecting essentialism and concurrently adopting a critical stance towards all kinds of eclecticism and also towards any one-sided views of the national and ethnic phenomenon (Llobera 1987; Tonkin et al. 1989; Barth 1969). Also, our approach attempts to transcend the weaknesses of the evolutionary scheme that deals with ethnicity as a historical reality previous to nationalism, adopting instead the views of a dialectical historical structuralism; according to the latter, both the view of historical evolution as lineal and the adoption of an one-sided determinism that attributes historical change to the determining influence of some or other factor are equally rejected. From the perspective of this critical theoretical

position, the phenomenon of ethnicity may have emerged from within the very process of nation-state formation and does not necessarily precede it (Banks 1996; Eriksen 1991).

The above thoughts concern the concept of ethnic identity. Regarding the ideas of cultural identity or the cultural “tradition” of a particular group that is included in a nation and a “national tradition” that is constructed on terms of continuity and homogeneity, we also have to resort to some necessary theoretical statements. Culture, here, is not considered a closed and cohesive whole but rather an open, dynamic process and practice. In this sense, we do not adopt a static and essentialist approach to cultural identity but a dynamic and historical perspective that allows for both the possibility of identity transformation and that of the invention of traditions (Bourdieu 1977; Kuper 1999; Abou-Lugod 1991; Hobsbawm- Ranger 1983).

Let’s see, then, whether we can talk about a “Vlach culture” or a “Vlach tradition”. Let’s say, in advance, that these phrases may be adopted only as conventions for the sake of the discussion of our theme and not as realities. If we assumed the existence of *a* Vlach culture, we would have to deny our theoretical framework, which does not accept the concept of culture as homogeneous and cohesive whole, and even the very concept of historicity, which involves a dynamic approach to space and time. We shall talk then conventionally, as agreed, about “Vlach culture”, or, if you like, about the

Vlach cultural realities in the territory of Greece from the beginnings of the foundation of the Greek state.

To the extent that we can isolate certain common characteristics of these communities and groups, that developed on the basis of stock breeding activities in the mountain area of Pindos and in relation to the nearby flatlands and coastal areas they use as winter pastures, we are directed to the historical reality of Ottoman domination, the creation of mountain communities, the economic thriving of pastoralism reaching its peak with the development of interrelated manufacturing activities and the transition of a significant part of the population to commercial operations.

The creation of Vlach settlements in the mountains of the Greek country, just as in the wider Balkan area, is dated from between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and marks the end of nomadic life for a large part of Vlach population. This development, for any who continue their stock breeding activity, means the transition to the vertical relocations, from the mountain to the planes and vice-versa (spring timeautumn), a system internationally known as *transhumance*. The base for these movements is the mountain village, which this way develops considerably.

The flourishing of pastoralism, which is due to the economic and political context of the era, leads to a booming that translates into significant manufacturing activities related to pastoral produce and not only. Subsequently, from

manufacturing activity there emerges commerce, too, which starts out, partly, as transportation. This new development, which already begins from the seventeenth century and reaches its peak in the nineteenth, will lead to the creation of large merchant houses abroad and a transformation of the local communities, involving economic, social and cultural differentiations between them at the same time.

Manufacturing and commercial activities bring about economic and social re-arrangements, the most important of which is the differentiation of the stratum that enters these activities, which, subsequently, will play a crucial role in the inclusion, precisely, of the local communities in the wider social and political frame and their cultural transformation. A significant fact is that the new social layering produces new tensions within the communities themselves, while, concurrently, a differentiation on an inter-communal level is also being created, between a category of communities that develop into important manufacturing and commercial centres and those that remain basically pastoral. This socio-economic differentiation generates a cultural distinction as well, a differentiation on the level of mentalities and by extension on the ideological framework, a phenomenon, which, in my view, may provide the key for understanding the developments that follow, concerning the incorporation of the Vlachs into the Greek nation and their active involvement in

the process of the completion of the corresponding nation-state.

The social stratum of merchants, which emerges from the bosom of the stock breeding community via particular mechanisms operating within the Ottoman political economy, transcends the limits of the local cultural systems and their corresponding collective mentalities, adopts new cultural models and values, forms a new consciousness and partakes in the circle of an emerging elite, which takes on a pioneering role with respect to the formation of the national liberating movement. The process of economic and social transition is identified with a cultural transformation, which, in the last analysis, equals the inclusion of this part of the Vlach ethnic group into the bosom of the Greek national elite that played a determining role in the cause of Greek nation-state formation and the development of national ideology itself. From the moment that the representatives of this category, in their vast majority, form a modern national consciousness, this is a Greek one, and important factors for this development are Greek education, which is identified with economic and social upward mobility, as well as Orthodoxy, which, by and large, identifies with Hellenism in the era of the emergence of nationalisms in the Balkans.

The transformation of an ethnic identity with strong local characteristics into a national one essentially meant for the Vlachs their integration into the new Greek nation. This is a

complex historical process that can be comprehended and interpreted with the tools of a contemporary anthropological theory of the nation. Throughout this process, a decisive role was played by the economic and social transformations that led to the creation of all those social strata, for which the very process of transition was parallel with their involvement in the Greek national movement. Therefore, the role of the commercial class and of the peculiar elite that emerged from the processes mentioned above was crucial, also with respect to the formation of a Greek national consciousness in the wider population of Vlach societies, which followed. Let's not forget, for example, that a multitude of merchants, intellectuals and priests of Vlach origin develop intense activity regarding the spreading of Greek language and letters, an activity that rather frequently goes hand in hand with a negative positioning against their own mother tongue which is the Vlach language.

The example of Daniel Moschopolitis (1754-1822) is rather typical. Daniel belongs to the category of those clerics, intellectuals and teachers, who, following the teachings of Kosmas Aitolos and not only struggle for the prevalence of the Greek language in the Balkans. In this line of thought, he also publishes his *Dictionary of Four Languages*, in 1802 (Konstantakopoulou 1988). On the other hand, a typical case of a merchant who offers part of his property for the sake of spreading the Greek language within the area of his native homeland is Michael Tositsas from Metsovo, who bequeathed

his home town a large sum of money, with the purpose of “the expansion of Hellenism and the uprooting of the prevalent local tongue, the so-called Vlach” (Tsoukalas 1977: 31-63).

Even in the community of Central Europe, where among intellectuals of Vlach origin a dispute breaks out concerning the written form of the Vlach language, the view that prevails is that the Greek alphabet should be adopted. Moreover, those who support the necessity of preserving the Vlach language do not connect this demand with claims of national character. There is a group of intellectuals who support the choice of the Latin alphabet for the written version of Vlach, among them some fanatic proponents for the cause of this language’s preservation, like G. Rosia and M. Boiagi (the latter also published a Grammar of Vlach), who, however, do not seem to have a clear position on the national direction of the Vlachs. We can generally say that, though a dispute among Vlach intellectuals and scholars in Central Europe and the surrounding countries was not avoided altogether, on the matter of their choice of nationhood, their vast majority backs the choice of Hellenism, and more particularly the version propounded by Regas Feraios; only a small group supported forcefully the right of respect for cultural particularity and especially their language difference. A rather small, dissenting group, that represented a peculiar language “nationalism”, supporting the establishment of the Vlach language in conjunction with the employment of the Latin alphabet, seems

to have been connected more with the emergence of the Romanian national movement, which afterwards created the known problem of “Romanian propaganda”, rather than expressing an autonomous Vlach national move (Konstantakopoulou 1988; Garidis 1985; Berard 1987; Nikolaidou 1995).

Already since the eighteenth century then, next to the agropastoral world, a second world of commerce is created as well, connected with large-scale transportations and the big commercial centres of Europe. The future of the Vlach people is shaped on the basis of these two poles that interact intensely; but of the two, the second one is the most influential, regarding their cultural development (Rokou 1983).

If the first important landmark in the history of Vlach populations was the construction of communities and the following economic, social and cultural development on the axis of manufacturing and long distance commercial activities, the second landmark was their integration in the Greek nationstate itself, a process that was long and complex, given the delayed annexation of the North counties of the country, where they are chiefly located. Their integration into the Greek nation-state, apart from the transformation of localethnic identities into a unitary national identity that meant a downgrading of the group’s cultural particularities in favour of national homogeneity, had long-standing consequences for the political operation of the communities, which involved



their weakening, as they now succumbed to a centralised government, giving up any elements of self-rule and autonomy that used to distinguish them in the context of the Ottoman system of government.

The new governmental and political framework of operation for the local communities is a condition that weakens them culturally as well, since it disrupts significantly its economical and social texture. Thus they experience a sense of increasing decline, since at the same time they partake in a rationale of homogenisation, where the elements of their difference, to the extent that they cannot be transformed into peripheral variations of the central national model, are marginalised or gradually eliminated (Herzfeld 1982; Karakasidou 1993; Tziovas 1994; Just 1989). Above all, the Vlach language is subjected to gradual downgrading and is in danger of extinction, since it remains oral and is used only among the Vlachs themselves within community spaces and in family frameworks, with a generally increasing tendency to abandon it altogether.

The peculiarity, however, that characterises the development of the contemporary Greek state, from the perspective of political economy, that is also an effect of its dependencies, and the consequent “dualism” of the modern Greek social formation on the axis of a dichotomy between urban centre and periphery, functioned somehow, ironically, beneficently for the survival of “traditional” forms of social

organisation and cultural expression, at least in the short term (Mouzelis 1978; Vergopoulos 1975). The marginalisation of the provinces obstructed its smooth urbanisation process, and effectuated a concoction of different elements, in a way that led, for a period of time, to the reproduction of particular cultural differences. The communities, operating in the framework of a problematical modernisation process that in parallel to the much desired “development” produced aspects of underdevelopment as well, either by growing defence mechanisms or because of an incapacity to adjust, preserve elements of their “traditional” organisation, not as survivals of the past, but as live constituents of their identity, an identity in a state of prolonged transition and suspended transformation (Nitsiakos 1995; Damianakos et al. 1997).

Generally, the period from the integration of the Northern counties of the country, with the end of the Balkan Wars (1912-13), until the end of the Civil War (1949) is characterised by tense assimilating processes. On the one hand, the ideological apparatuses of the national state and, on the other, the very process of modernisation and urbanisation of the Greek society contribute to a rash marginalisation of peripheral and ethnic differences and an analogous empowering of the centre’s standards and of the apparatuses of cultural homogenisation.

And while all this happens at a relatively slow pace until the Civil War, during the period after that, the process is accelerated and manifest in forms of subversive changes, such

that allow us to speak of deep fractures in the social structures and the cultural systems of the periphery. The great exodus from the rural areas and the barrenness of the mountain areas in particular, together with the prevalence of urban ideals and urbanisation, do not lead only to a demographic draining of the Vlach communities but engender a diaspora that will signal the beginning of the end of a long period. Very often, the break with the past takes the form of a denial of one's cultural foundations, and the depreciation of a dated way of life leads to social stigma for those who represent it. Those who stay behind have to confront, together with their economical problems, their social marginalisation, while those who leave make anxious efforts to adjust to the life in the urban centres, a fact of great consequences as regards their very cultural identity.

The decades of 1950 and 1960 create, indeed, a fracture, the awareness of which, in conjunction with the conditions that prevailed in the next decades (the phenomenon of "return to the roots" and its cultural effects), leads to a generalised effort of reconnecting with the place of origin and preserving cultural traditions. While the discussion about the concept of "tradition", as this is constructed in the context of a whole current of thought called "Folklorismus" (Meraklis 1989), is outside our scope here, we can still stress the fact that all this "return" stays on the surface of things, on the picturesque aspects of culture, without ever really posing issues of

otherness. On the contrary, it functions largely as one more mechanism of integration and assimilation.

Generally, the increasing social and cultural integration, which was effectuated, after a certain point, on the basic axis of the urbanisation process, stroke the final blow to the historical context of Vlach cultural otherness, just like all the other peripheral, local and ethnic identities, with the result of its gradual assimilation by the central cultural prototypes, which, indeed, are now slowly escaping from the control of the nation-state itself, via the European institutions and the apparatuses of globalisation in the last decades of the twentieth century. The discussion about multi-culturalism and respect of cultural others within this new framework is another chapter, outside the scope of this study.