Sharing Experiences - Stories of culture and identity of Albanian migrants in Greece

Entela Kaleshi
Institute for Change and Leadership in Albania

Abstract

This paper is based on the research and participatory fieldwork with Albanian migrants in Greece. It also presents the stories of three families living and working in Greece while sharing their lives between their everyday time in Greece and family connections in Albania. Their everyday life contains direct and indirect links with the familiars from the place of origin being manifested in the new relationships that they have set up in Greece, in their daily routine and material culture thus becoming an integral part of daily activity.

Parents, other familiars and friends living in Greece and family visits in Albania play the most important role in the process of the Albanian cultural identity formation. They put in contacts their children with the Albanian culture through stories from Albania, meanings and values attached to objects, habits and rituals, passing on the ethnic language; taking part in the events organized by Albanian community centres and sending them to their grandparents' places in Albania.

Given this commitment made by these families living between two countries, preserving the connections with their familiars in Albania and in the same time living their everyday life in a new cultural setting, theories about formation of cultural identity are taken into consideration when analyzing how the daily activity impacts on their cultural identity. The article argues that these experiences formed by living in two different worlds result in the creation and manifestation of pluri-local identities, challenging the concept of spatially limited cultural heritage.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Migration, Integration, Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction

The fall of the communist regime in Albania in 1990 initiated a continued wave of migration of Albanian population that it is still ongoing. The political and social instability, poor economic conditions and changes in government brought the largest flow of Albanian migration in modern times and favored by cultural, linguistic and geographic vicinity and low migration cost it was mainly directed to neighboring countries of Italy and Greece. In 2010 Albania was granted with visa-free travel to the Schengen area and this also affected the crossing of the borders and the circular migration across the land border between Greece and Albania was for many years, one of the most significant irregular migratory flows across the EU's external borders. Due to the poor economic and living conditions in Albania the labor market in Albania it is still vulnerable and affects the on-going migrant flows from Albania to the most developed labor markets of other countries. These migrant flows are directly linked with labor market development especially level of unemployment and poverty.

Migration also acts as a catalyst of cultural change because migrants are often

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dissatisfied with the cultural developments in their area of living and as they tend to integrate in the hosting country where they are living, they absorb everyday social and cultural aspects and incorporate them in their way of thinking and living. In this process migrants weaken their common values, traditions, songs, native language, their cuisine, as well as social status and important relationships and in sometimes even the financial security during the period that they live in other country. They lose a "world of their own" that provided a sense of security and how to lead their lives and create a new world that has elements from both cultures, from their home country and the hosting country. In the time that social systems and culture are systems in motion that constantly evolve and change through internal processes and due to their contact with the environment and other cultures, migration is one of the most important factors in the multi-cultural dynamics of changes in every culture and society, and Albania is a country that has been affected a lot by this process.

It is the integration process in the host country that lead the changes during the interaction of the two cultures, affection the level of dialogue that occurs between the inner voice of native culture and the culture of the host country. Integration find durable connections that can serve as intermediate bridge between the past life and everyday life, so integration is in the same time an on-going process and also a state of being. This process is aimed to achieve a desired state, a successful integration in the hosting country and when it is successful the differences between nationals and migrants or ethnic groups are diminished.

Participants in this research identified education, work and social life as three most important areas and their legal status and being treated as equal by the majority as the most important aspects for a successful integration.

When analyzing the cultural changes in the life of migrants I was based in the concept of transnationalism as a key to understand their behaviors, attitudes, values and beliefs. As they live in a foreign country, but keep relations, contacts and activities with the country of origin they create "social fields" that link both countries. Transnationalism is defined as the process by which migrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). These social fields are the product of a series of interconnected and overlapping economic, political, and socio-cultural activities and according to Portes there is a growing number of people living 'dual lives'; speaking more than one language, having homes in two countries and making a living through continuous cross-border contacts, (Portes et. al. 1999).

These dynamics are crucial for the analysis of the usefulness of the concept of circularity in capturing the transformation of the Albanian migration, which needs to be mapped across the complexity of the socio-economic and cultural transaction underpinning an intra- as well as trans-national social field (Vullnetari 2009).

It was the fall of the communist regime in Albania in 1990 the starting point of the massive migration of Albanian population in the modern times. During the communism there were sporadic tentative to pass the borders, sometimes successful, but many others who failed in their endeavors to leave the country were punished, their familiars as well, and their punishment by the regime served as an example for other who want to escape for a better life. The political and social instability,

poor economic conditions and changes in government brought the largest flow of Albanian migration in modern times, with an estimated 300,000 individuals leaving the country from 1990 to 1992, primarily to neighboring Greece and Italy (Pastore, 1998; Piperno, 2002). The migration flows towards other more developed countries in Europe and America continued with another peak during the non-stable situation created with the fall of pyramid schemes in 1997 that caused a political, social and economic crisis; and poverty and a high unemployment rate were the factors that contributed to the increase of the number of Albanian migrants in other countries.

The figures from the Albanian Department of Emigration within the Albanian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs estimated that, by 1999, there were 800,000 Albanians living abroad (Barjaba 2000). The majority of them, 500,000, were in Greece, 200,000 were in Italy, and the remaining 100,000 in other European countries and in North America. Some of the figures presented were likely to be underestimates, given the mobility of Albanian migrants, especially within Europe, and the rapid evolution of new migration channels and routes in recent years.

The number of Albanians in Greece appears to be high. Two large regularization programs about the legalization status of foreigners in Greece during 1998 and 2001 led to a total of 720,000 applications, of which Albanians represented approximately 60 percent, or 430,000. The 2001 Greek census shows 655,000 foreign residents, although critics contend that the number is more likely between 800,000 and 1 million (OECD, 2002). Considering that 720,000 migrants had applied for legal residence and that by the end of 2001, 585,000 migrants had work permits, the critics' estimates are more likely to be correct. Estimates in literature suggest that more than half of the migrant population in Greece is Albanians. According to Labrianidis & Hatziprokopiou (2005) the total number of Albanians in Greece is 450,000-550,000.

These figures are confirmed by the official statistics published by Greek Institute of Statistics, and as for 1.01.2015 the population living in Greece by country of birth (Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) is 453,072 where Albanian are the largest community. Albanian migrants in Greece are mainly families and together with all children born in Greece the figures confirm a number of nearly 500 000 Albanians.

Albania is one of the poorest in Europe, with a rising poverty rate of 17.9 percent and a youth unemployment rate of nearly 32.5 percent in 2014 (INSTAT, 2014). It currently has one of the world's highest emigration rates, relative to its population, at -3.3 migrants per 1,000 people, and a total migrant population of more than 1.25 million in 2014, according to UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs data.

Migration policies of the Republic of Albania consist of the migration and emigration policies expressed in the migration rules drafted and approved for this purpose, in line with the migration policy and migration rules of EU, aiming at minimizing the migration costs and optimising benefits, both for the migrants and countries, through the management of migratory flows, guaranteeing the fundamental human rights and freedoms of migrants, fight against illegal migration etc.

Migration policy in itself consists of travel document policy, visa policy, admission policy, employment policy, stay policy, family reunification policy, unaccompanied minors policy, policy of fight against illegal migration including illegal entry, illegal

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stay, illegal employment, marriage for purposes of documentation, carriers liability, return and admission policy, removal and expulsion policy, detention policy, policy of protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of migrants and personal data protection, policy of repressive measures and appeal, policy of integration of migrants, etc.

In a country such as Albania which has been affected a lot by migration, it has been observed that the flow of human resources reduced socio-cultural productivity, but it improved the economic situation in the country, in the meanwhile migrants face the challenge to adapt their socio-cultural system, values and cultural norms with the social codes and cultural norms of the hosting country, which are often very different from those of their country of origin. What happens more often is that these migrants as a response to the assimilation of their culture make partial adjustment of their culture to a new cultural environment and preserve the ties they have with their homeland by strengthening family links and relationships and use of new communication channels.

During the last years it is observed also a large number of returned Albanian who due to the economic crisis in Greece lost their jobs and have returned to Albania and sometime being engaged in seasonal works in Greece or immigrated to other European countries. Their savings are invested in small companies in Albania mainly in the agricultural, trade and consumption businesses. The general consensus is that there are noticed two interconnected aspects: the personal success, involving social and economic security for the migrant as an individual or family member in the local community and the second aspect is the contribution they bring to the economic and social development in the country. Return migrants give a new impetus to the labour market development and technology advancement and they can be a real stimulus to the development of local community where they invest their savings on small businesses, use their gained skills and know how, create jobs and change the labor market.

2. Methodology

This paper is part of my doctoral thesis research work about the cultural changes as a result of migration of Albanian migrants in Greece. It is based mainly on the research and participatory fieldwork with Albanian migrants in Athens, Greece and review of reports, papers and other official documents in published in Albania, Greece and other countries. The research has combined qualitative and quantitative methods such as interviews, questionnaires, official statistics and documents review.

As case studies were taken the stories of three families living and working in Greece (cities of Athens, Larisa and Igoumenitsa) who also had close contacts with their relatives and other connections in Albania. I had personal contacts and several meetings with these families and the interviews were conducted during July – August 2015.

A set of questionnaires was filled by other migrants in these three towns and in Albania during summer of 2015 when they were back for holidays. Access to interviewees was ensured following snowball sampling in combination with targeted sampling based

on key informants input. There were three locations that were eventually chosen for fieldwork in Greece, Athens, Larisa and Igoumenitsa and two towns in Albania, Tirana and Saranda.

The findings presented today are based on data gathered according the above sources.

3. The role of families in the migration process

Over the past two decades, family-linked migration is the most important form of legal migration of Albanians in other countries. Various researchers agree that the family plays a decisive role during the migration process, given that changing one's country of residence is a critical event entailing both opportunities and risks. Although the above families are very different, during the meetings and conversations with them there are observed lots of similar things and patterns. They left Albania looking for a job and better living conditions. They came from traditional families in Albania, but during the emigration process, various mechanisms have weaken the traditional system of family relations and strong internal and external pressures have changed their psychological, economic and social field. These families are more focused on their family well-being, they support other families during the integration process and the economic circumstances have encouraged families to act as an economic unit in the migration process. Two different researches realized in two main urban areas in Greece indicate that it is an increasing socio-economic mobility and an improve of community's working conditions that include the participation in the social security schemes, access to formal employment and jobs of higher status and salary.

Integration Strategy
These three cases, questionnaires filled, previous researches and published articles show that although there are many differences in the way families and Albanian migrants are integrated in Greece, there are very positive trends in the integration processes. The second generation of children that have born in Greece or have gone there at a young are decisive for a successful integration. The elements that were identified in the interviews and questionnaires as important for the integration are:
(a) communication and language; (b) socializing with Greek / other families (c) having knowledge about customs, traditions and value systems of hosting country; (d) involvement in social activities especially those regarding school education of children, (e) demonstrations of non-conflict and low ethnic identity; and (f) contacts with familiars in Albania.

Relations with the homeland – transnational families
But in the same time when they develop integration strategies migrants develop also a set of informal interpersonal ties, family and friendship ties in Albania, these social networks link them to their home and familiars in Albania and help them to overcome difficulties and the integration problems. Regular contacts in the form of visits, videos, emails and telephone calls; financial remittances; practices of building houses in the homeland has fostered the social ties and cultural practices with the home country. The findings show that these families build in different levels their lives between

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Greece and their native home towns and villages. The three families and their friends and relatives have various mechanisms to hold symbolic and real relations with the old homeland. Albanian families have established a life with a cultural belonging in Greece and maintain continuous cross-border contacts with their beloved persons in Albania. These took the form of repeated visits, regular contacts, exchanging gifts and photos and occasionally receiving family visitors from Albania (Al-Ali 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; Parreñas, 2005). Trips to Albania are also very popular and sometime spend summer holidays with their grandparents in Albania.

Use of Albanian language
In migration literature native language is considered among the key cultural tools employed in displacement to remember 'home' away from home (Kershen, 2006). The case study families use Albanian during their daily communication and practice it at home and less in the public spaces. It is observed also a use a both languages in the same time known as the phenomena of 'double consciousness' in the diasporic realm (Gilroy 1993). Adults speak Albanian to each other at home and children speak Greek with their Greek-born Albanian friends, while parent-child communication is on / between both languages. Parents, relatives and friends actively encouraged children's contacts with the ethnic language confirming the role of the wider family and 'ethnic enclaves' in initiating the second generation to bilingualism (Kershen, 2000).

4. Conclusions

This paper summarizes Albanian families' experiences, integration and cultural changes while sharing their lives between their everyday time in Greece and family connections in Albania.

They have formed and developed adaptation and survival strategies from the beginning of their migration till the establishment in the host country and they have learned the host country social and institutional environment and the related migration policy measures and implementation practices. After that they have adapted their plans and developed coping strategies in response to the social and institutional environment of the country of destination. Their narratives have showed the limitations and opportunities which they actively integrate into their everyday life experience and their understanding of themselves, their country of origin and the host country.

This migration experience is reflected on these families' identity; how they see themselves within the context of the host country, their identifications with the country of origin and their individual self-understanding. These families living between two countries, keep the contacts with their familiars in Albania, project a life if they will be back in Albania and in the same time adapt and integrate to their everyday life in the host cultural setting.

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