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Research Article

A multicultural environment – A major development and integration factor

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Abstract

Historical evidence highlights that regions characterized by the convergence and cohabitation of diverse cultures serve as primary drivers of development. Nowadays, the southern region of Albania stands as a vivid and enduring example of this phenomenon throughout history. Arguments that speak of integrative and at the same time differentiating processes in terms of cultural and ethnic identity include mythology and historical milestones such as Dodona, Pyrrhus of Epirus and Alexander the Great, to figures like Ali Pasha Tepelena and cultural hub of Voskopoja. Historically analysing, the establishment of the peace institutions and good understanding such as Bektashism, the ideology of national renaissance movement, are examples of differentiating analogy of the multicultural reality. The communist regime in Albania, the geographical isolation, the physical and cultural infliction resulting in the loss of contacts and communication with the world, the climate of ethnocentrism and the consequences in the way of judging and assessing oneself in relation to others and the opening of the country and mass emigration are other historical aspects. In this sense, main objective of this manuscript is the analysis of the positive and negative consequences with assimilative influence and the opposite:- juxtaposition to strengthen ethnocentrism.

Keywords: factor, integration, culture, Albania, multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

Focusing on the Balkan literature of the period coinciding with the formation of nation-states in the region, multicultural phenomena and environments were subjected to appropriative reasonings and doctrines in favor of a certain ethnicity. They were differentiated to the point of opposition, thus losing their diachronic and expressive dimension of integration and development. The article aims to make an analysis regarding the multicultural and multiethnic diachronic environment to overcome the nationalist claims on the diachronic and multicultural reality by bearing the fact that these attitudes deprive these realities of the abilities to contribute in the favor of integration and development.

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This is achieved through the mythological and historical diachronic reference. Ancient mythology and early historical reality show us that the civilization of the Aegean Sea, which also seems to be the "the crossroads of the great boulevard of Mediterranean civilization" (Karagatsi, 1994) is the product of the perfect contact and separation of the three continents of the old world: Europe, Asia and Africa. In this "boulevard" and around it, the modern civilization of humanity, political and military empires, religious foundations, life-giving cultures of history and human progress will take their path. However, it is evident that most significant ethnicities in history eventually fade from prominence, yet their influence continues to resonate and shape the course of historical developmnets. The very culture of the Aegean, Crete, Troy, Athens, Sparta, Rome, Alexander the Great, etc, which can be compared as comets in the history of mankind, speaks of this (Hatzopoullou, 2001).

However, there is a place that didn't have the brightness of a comet, but of a sun. We are talking about Epirus. Situated on a geostrategic crossing between East and West, North and South, in its cultural substratum, it grafted cultures, ethnic identities, languages and different traditions, gaining the right to reappear at the crossroads of history to assume the decisive role in all directions, for itself and for the region (Hatzopoullou, 2001).

2. Theoretical approach

In the book "Albanians between the West and the East", Prof. E. Çabej (1994) states that: "*The popular epic of the Balkans from the Byzantine period and from the beginning of the Turkish period is in the shadow of the Byzantine Digenis Akritas.*"

 The name of the hero, with mythological measures and actions, "Digenis" comes from the compound Greek word dy+genis which means two sexes, peoples, ethnicities. "Akritas" is a Greek word that means corner, edge, border. According to the epic song, Digenis was born from the matrimonial cross between Amur, an Arab figure, and the daughter of the Byzantine court. In the X-XI century Byzantine empire had to solve the problem of Arab attacks on its borders. The clash brought about the (conventional) crossing of two ethnicities with opposite charges and interests, resulting in the birth of Digenis, - the source of inspiration and sustainability and simultaneously the solution key for peace and progress.

And in the book "Albanians between the West and the East" Çabej (1994) tells us that *"... In Central and Southern Albania, exist more civilized places , which, being geographically much more open, have always suffered more from foreign influence.*"

Greek historians Nikolaos Vernikos and Sofia Dhaskalopoulou (1999) dedicate to Epirus the beginnings of the new Greek ideology that led to the revolution of 1821. They support their argument in the biethnic, multicultural and multilingual phenomenon that characterizes this ethnogeographical unit, while Çabej (1994) speaks more in general in this regard when he says that..."*This intermediate attitude between the West and the East, combined with the rooted maintenance of its own ethnic nature, has forever carved the distinctive face of Albania..*"

So, it pertains to the laws rooted in the anthropological relations among the region's inhabitants, the geographical environment, and its geostrategic position. The geographical location confers upon it the appropriate positioning to be the most advantageous strategic passage of the West towards the East and vice versa. At the same time, it is the only passage for northerners to the South and to the sea with easier and better living opportunities.

In this intersection, the cultural and ethnic identity of this area inhabitants was preserved and developed. Development in this case presupposes the acquisition of others values in a process of organic adaptation in favour of existing values. Polyphonic song, this living emblem of Epirus 'cultural identity constitutes the most significant argument. This style of singing chronologically carries us back to the origin of Dodona culture (Mihailidhis, 1999) (Karabelas, 2007) and geographically to the empire of Alexander the Great (Liavas, 1998). Today this form of singing persists in Epirus, being performed in three languages Greek, Albanian and Vlach (Lloli, 2006). The oracle of Dodona itself (in a variant), which will definitively define the ethnocultural identity of this region, is the product of the grafting of the local natural element, the tree with the black doves from Libya (Hatzopoullou, 2001).

This reality also presupposed the coexistence of diverse values, tolerance and understanding, and at the same time differentiating, denying, overlapping, opposing premises. This is the only way to understand the reality of coexistence in this territory for a long time, - the end of the Byzantine period, most of the Ottoman Empire - of five different cultures (Greek, Albanian, Vlach, Turkish, Venetian) (Vernikos and Daskalopoulou, 1999).

3. Concretization of the idea

In the not-so-distant past, from this geographical region, more than two ancient empires thrived, leaving an enduring mark on civilization that reverberates even today. Pyrrhus of Epirus started the establishment of his empire in the Western regions, while the other scion, Alexander the Great, forged the mightiest empire of the era, renowned for its profound civilizing influence, marking the dawn of a new epoch.

The Roman Empire, extending from the territories of Epirus to the East, drew inspiration from Alexander's legacy, incorporating his military strategies to modernize its forces. These tactics facilitated the Latinization of southeastern and central Europe.

In more recent centuries, during the early 13th century, following the fall of Constantinople to Latin forces, Byzantium found continuity in the geographical confines of Epirus. Here, the luminaries of the former empire sought sanctuary and established the Despotate of Epirus, reviving the Byzantine legacy for another two centuries. This Despotate, led by Greek, Albanian, Serbian, and Italian rulers, served as a bastion of Byzantine resurgence (Barka, 2016).

History echoed once more in 1825, when Sultan Mahmud II initiated a repression

on the Bektashi Janissaries and their sect. Many adherents were compelled to flee Istanbul and move to Albania and Bosnia. .In Albania, particularly in the southern regions nestled amidst the peak of Tomori Mount, whose name is associated with the cultural expansion of Dodona, the Bektashi centers found their abode. Positioned symmetrically with Olympus, the iconic temple of Ancient Greek- polythetic system, the Bektashis erected their pantheic temple. Bektashism, characterized by its tolerance and contemplative approach towards other faiths, shares commonalities with Christianity, fostering mutual understanding and harmony.

Many sought refuge in Bektashism to shield or preserve their Christian essence. The renowned English archaeologist Frederick Hasluck (2003), in his study of Bektashism, concluded that transitions from Christianity to Bektashism often occurred peacefully, akin to the ancient practice of integrating new beliefs with the old or recognizing their compatibility.

In contexts where bridges of communication between Christianity and traditional Sunni Islam had collapsed unjustly, and diplomacy had no chance to direct, Bektashism thrived on a broader anthropological level. This peaceful coexistence stemmed from the inherent contradiction within the anthropology of Epirus carried by the Janissaries, the bearers and supporters of Bektashism, whose eventual Muslimization was driven not by militant fanaticism but by allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. They are orthodox.

Clayer (2009), focusing on Albanian Bektashism, highlights the movement's strong ties and its role in the establishment of the Albanian state and the dissemination of written Albanian language. This elucidates why Bektashis became the mainstay of the Albanian national movement. An illustrative historical figure is Ali Pasha Tepelena, born into a Labe family with stringent codes of masculinity and severe laws for enemies. Raised among affluent Lunxio families, whose wealth derived from migration, matured in the Pasha's palace in Ioannina and surrounded by Greek and Albanians counselors educated in the West and the bravest warriors, the Pasha of Ioannina adapted his rule policy to diachronic factor of Epirus, which is related to its multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual phenomenon. (Vernikos and Daskalopoulou, 1999).

Ali Pasha's cruel intuition, charisma and ability to negotiate with the West positioned him advantageously, despite being perceived as a formidable threat to Ottoman authority. He forged a symbiosis of extreme contrasts, leveraging his atrocities alongside Greek market tendencies, knowledge and culture. Moreover, his distinct economic, diplomatic, and political policies in Europe fostered a conducive environment for Enlightenment ideas cultivated by the Hellenic factor ideals (Barka, 2016).

In his quest for an independent state, Ali Pasha's embrace of Enlightenment and Romanticism laid the groundwork for a new national identity, combining aspirations for freedom with a revival of glorious tradition. This three-dimensional approach aimed to instill a collective consciousness among his people, guiding them towards a path of liberation and recognition of their historical heritage.

This goal was seen as a three-dimensional integrity. Finding, validating and promoting a genesis of a glorious tradition for its people. Raising the awareness of the common people as a worthy successor of this glorious historical reality with the aim of orienting them on the path of freedom. The third direction was related to the need to recognize this glorious historical reality and its time bearers from the West, which was also at that time determining the destiny of small nations.

This ideology had produced its own products. With Epirus as a starting point, it had become a new nation-forming and state-forming ideology for Greece and had inspired the Greek revolution of 1821 (Barka, 2016).

A few decades later, the same region would become instrumental in the emergence and consolidation of the Albanian nation-building ideology. As noted by Clayer (2009) in 1879, when the "*Society for Printing Albanian Letters*" was established, out of the 28 founding members, there were ten Muslims, four Catholics from Shkodra, and fourteen Christians Orthodox from the regions of Gjirokastra and Korça. Among the ten Muslims, nine hailed from these provinces, with one originating from Starova. These facts validate the assertion that ethnic diversity and religious multiculturalism form the basis of the birth of a new ideology. Concurrently, they mark the inception of a unity among opposing elements, which, as previously mentioned, will culminate in the delineation of distinct ethnic groups into separate nations.

Voskopoja (Moscopole) case constitutes another precious stone in the diachronic mosaic of the region's multicultural environment. For almost a century, (end of the 17th century - end of the 18th century) Voskopoja (Moscopole) turned into one of the most famous urban centers of the Ottoman Empire. Within the region's natural setting, trade flourished with Venice, Vienna, Odessa, and Istanbul (from east to west), fostering the growth of crafts and culture. Voskopoja emerged as the Empire's first city with its own printing press. The publication of the second book in 1731—a four-language dictionary (Greek-Albanian-Vlach-Bulgarian)—epitomized a tangible manifestation of a multicultural environment, serving as both a prerequisite and catalyst for development that transcended the confines of an entire empire (Adhami, 1989).

The establishment of the New Academy of Voskopoja in 1744, alongside its library and printing house, represented the pinnacle of Western education and culture in the region (Uçi, 2004). Study programs were permeated by the spirit of the Western Enlightenment. The degrees were equivalent to analogous schools in the West. Young people from all over South-Eastern Europe studied there (Barka, 2016).

On the other hand, Voskopoja is also an indicator of how at the beginning of the formation processes of nation-states, the multicultural diachronic environment was subjected to these interests. The differentiation was carried over to the extreme antagonism that led to the destruction of Voskopoja. To this day, more than two nations or ethnicities claim the creators and the best of Voskopoja.

Voskopoja (Moscopole) stands as the focal point where special people, among them the Albanian people, do not see their own national definition in their confrontation with the Ottoman conqueror, but with their neighbors, its tradition and origin. Clayer

(2009) in her research on the origin and birth of the Albanian national consciousness, among others, comes to the conclusion that Albanianism begins as its definition of confrontation between the east, north and south neighbors.

4. Conclusion

The formula of the confrontational family fed the ruling ideology of the totalitarian communist state to the maximum. Amidst the country's hermetic isolation and eventual confrontation with neighboring nations and the wider world, an ethnocentric socialist nationalism, orchestrated by the communist leadership, was enforced to quell internal dissent and to divert attention from the population's own welfare and needs.

Following the country's opening and mass emigration, a dual trend emerged. The first trend revolves around individual integration, characterized by assimilation rather than communal engagement with the broader world. The second prevailing tendency involves a "mechanical" integration with neighboring peoples. The hurdle lies in reconciling the collective identity with the dynamics of neighboring relations. The consequences extend beyond the isolation experienced by those entrenched in a singular mindset amidst today's globalized and multicultural world. They are intricately linked to hindering greater integration within this evolving reality and impeding the revitalization of the local diachronic, longstanding multicultural, and multi-ethnic environment, which serves as a universal asset for development and progress (Schmitt and Frantz, 2009).

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