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### ► To cite this version:

Rachele Bezzini, Gilles de Rapper, Ana Cristina Irian. Following ties and traces of migration: From Gjirokastër to Italy. *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 2021, 37 (1), 10.14434/aeer.v37i1.31942 . halshs-03502925

**HAL Id: halshs-03502925**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03502925>**

Submitted on 26 Dec 2021

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## Following ties and traces of migration: From Gjirokastër to Italy

Rachele Bezzini

*Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR)*

Gilles de Rapper

*École française d'Athènes*

Ana-Cristina Irian

*Universitatea Națională de Arte (UNARTE), Bucharest*

### **Abstract**

The Albanian town of Gjirokastër is located 30 kilometers from the Greek border. While this proximity has inevitably contributed to directing migration flows to Greece, the focus of this article is to understand the characteristics of migration from Gjirokastër to Italy – the second destination for Albanian migrants after Greece. Findings will show how, despite its marginality, migration from Gjirokastër to Italy plays a significant role in remaking the symbolic boundaries within the social space under consideration. Based on a short period of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the summer of 2015, this research follows the ties and traces of migration from Gjirokastër to Italy through an experimental analysis of the town's visual landscape and soundscape and that of the narratives which emerged from photo-elicitation sessions and face-to-face interviews with individuals related to Albanian migrants in Italy. Thanks to the analysis of both these public and private spheres, the article specifically proposes an understanding of the migration phenomenon which focuses on its transformative role within the place of origin, its categories and its hierarchies. In particular, we will see how migration to Italy may become a way to transform the status of Muslim Albanians vis-à-vis Orthodox Albanians in Gjirokastër through religious conversion to Catholicism, as well as as through the opportunities provided by learning the Italian language. In fact, both language learning and religious conversion – either *before* or *after* migration – seem to act as tools for social mobility on an individual basis. This concerns not only migrants, but also their kin and, more extensively, the local population of Gjirokastër through infrastructures (church, honorary consulate, school, etc.) indirectly linked with migration to Italy.

**Key-words:** Albania, Border, Boundary-Making, Ethnicity, Visual Anthropology.

The Albanian town of Gjirokaštër is located 30 kilometers from the Greek border. This geographical proximity is also reflected in its demographic composition and its relatively recent history of migration. In fact, the town hosts a substantial Greek population, due to its vicinity to villages belonging to the Greek ethnic minority in Albania, and thence migrants have mainly headed toward Greece. Authors have observed how migration to Greece has changed categories of identification among Albanian migrants, focusing on the migrant-receiving society i.e. Greece (de Rapper 2004; Nitsiakos 2010). In particular, it was shown that both Greek-speaking Albanians and Orthodox Albanians had taken advantage of their co-ethnicity upon migration to Greece. While the former benefited from sharing both language and religion with the Greek national majority, the latter could only mobilize the common religion. On the other hand, Muslim Albanians started to identify themselves as Northern Epirotes, once in Greece, in order to receive a more favorable treatment among the Greeks.

Thus, we can see how migration influences the way in which migrants identify themselves in the host society and aim to be identified by others (the hosts). Although it has been observed less, we hypothesize that this crossing of boundaries between categories (e.g. Greek from Albania, Orthodox, Northern Epirote, etc.) could also happen in the migrant sending society. Similarly, we assume that migration might also influence the way in which the people left behind identify themselves. This article examines this topic, through the adoption of the boundary-making theoretical framework, the combination of ethnographic and visual methods and the addition of a third element – Italy – to the analysis.

### **Ethnic boundary-making**

The concept of ethnic boundary was introduced in social anthropology by Barth (1969), who advocated a constructivist approach to ethnicity against a primordialist view according to which each ethnic group would correspond with a distinct culture self-perpetuating in isolation and separation from the others. Barth, instead, proposed that ethnicity needs to be understood not as an inventory of cultural differences of which groups are bearers, but as a product of an ethnic boundary and as a construction derived from an interactive process of self/other identification. Therefore, we can think of ethnicity as the result of intergroup contacts and cross-boundary relations based on dichotomized statuses to which identificational categories refer. Moreover, ethnicity is not only a way to organize social interaction, but also identification – being based on the combination of self-ascription and categorization, which means that social actors identify themselves and are classified by others in ethnic terms for the purpose of interaction. Gossiaux (2002) developed this approach further, noting how ethnicity is not only a relation of identity/alterity, but specifically a three-term relation in which reciprocal similarities and differences are measured in comparison to an implicit third pole. The third pole is necessary for understanding if *x* is similar or different from *y*, namely if it is ‘another self’ or ‘other.’ Lamont and Molnár (2002) also noted how ethnic boundaries separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership. In fact, by comparing ingroup and outgroup, social actors differentiate

themselves from others and positively evaluate the self in order to either maintain or achieve a higher status in certain social arenas. Wimmer (2008a; 2008b) demonstrated that ethnic boundary-making processes are universal, despite the particular categories which are at stake in specific time/space conjunctures (e.g. religion, nationality, ‘race’, etc). Through this boundary-making framework, we will now look into ethnicity in the Southern Albanian town of Gjirokastër.

It is often said that the religion of Albanians is Albanianism, which would suggest that, in Albania, national identity supersedes all religious differentiations. However, religion does make a difference when it comes to local communities, where Christian and Muslim Albanians do not entirely mix and Christians hold a higher status than Muslims. This is because Christianity is commonly associated with the West, Europe, modernity and civilization – in short, ‘culture’. Therefore, Christians are considered those ‘with culture’ (*me kulturë*). This definition applies to the collectivity as well as to individuals and it encompasses various subcategories such as language, education, knowledge, contacts with the outside world, technology etc. (de Rapper 2002; 2008). Although the opposition between Christians and Muslims in Albania is not new, previously their relative positions in the social hierarchy was reversed. In fact, during the Ottoman Empire, Muslims held a higher status than Christians. This boundary-making process by which ethnic categories invert is called “transvaluation” in Wimmer (2008a; 2008b). Migration also played a key role in the inversion of this hierarchy, due to the fact that the first migrants were Christians. In particular, their remittances often improved the conditions of their home villages and their social networks favored further migration abroad. Therefore, Christians are commonly seen as those who brought social change in the country (e.g. cuisine, clothes, etc.).

Along the Southern Albanian border, Christians are identified with Greeks, and Greece is the nearest example of a rich and developed country. With reference to this, de Rapper (2002) also notes that contacts with the outside world through the knowledge of a foreign language, travels and migration are especially sought in Albania and act as tools for social prestige. Nonetheless, some foreign countries are more valued than others – which is to say, for instance, that it is better to have family in the United States rather than in Greece or to watch French rather than Turkish television. Besides migration, de Rapper (2002) also found a sense of prestige also in short-term mobility abroad – going shopping, visiting friends and relatives, seeing doctors, etc. Later in the article, we will see how this mobility is actually the prerogative of those left behind and how it is enacted in the place of origin of migrants and, above all, in the private sphere of family life.

## **Methods**

Our research was planned to follow ties and traces of migration from Gjirokastër to Italy, conducting fieldwork which combined ethnography and visual methods. In this way, we aimed to understand the role played by a secondary destination of migration (Italy) in the place of origin of the migrants. We expected to find in the place itself, in its visual and sound landscape (public sphere) as well as in the narratives of its inhabitants (private sphere), the

material for answering our research questions: *How is the Italian presence displayed in public and private spaces in Gjirokastër? How is it linked with the Albanian migration to Italy? Are there recurring patterns of migration from Gjirokastër to Italy?*

Given the shortness of the fieldwork and further limitations such as the impossibility to include the voices of the migrants themselves, this method enabled us to catch several elements of the symbolic systems which inform ethnic boundary-making processes in this particular urban context. Our fieldwork was thus based on direct observation of public spaces, participant observation of both public and private interactions, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with research participants in Albanian and Italian language and photo-elicitation. In particular, the latter technique gives an added value to our research, first, because it makes it possible to add participant-generated pictures to researcher-generated pictures (Langmann and Pick 2018), and second, because it directly involves the research participants themselves in the process of meaning-making. With reference to this, Drew and Guillemin (2014) proposed an analytical framework for visual research divided into three stages: meaning-making through research participant's engagement, meaning-making through researcher's engagement and meaning-making through re-contextualization. The first stage focuses on the stories, experiences and representations of research participants. Participants' reflections on their own pictures and context of production helps the researcher in his/her interpretation. The second stage includes content-analysis of the pictures, coding and documentation done by the researcher in order to identify emerging patterns and relationships, beyond the research participant's voice. The third stage concerns the contextualization of data within the theoretical framework and the theorization of original findings.

In our fieldwork, we drew an outline in order to follow the web of connections which emerged in the research participants' narratives. We took photographic notes and written notes related to places and people included in the network of relations designed along with the fieldwork undertaken. These notes (about migration, Italian language, etc.) specifically regarded the visual and sound elements, which were visible and audible to an observer from the street level, as well as those inside the public and private places that we visited. In particular, indoors, we had access to photographic archives of private houses and photographic studios as well as to digital photographic albums from social networks accounts. The research was then completed with literature review and an online search for retrieving additional material which could complement and triangulate the information received from the field.

### **The Albanian post-communist migration**

King (2005) defined Albania as a "migration laboratory". No other country in Europe has been so deeply affected by migration as post-communist Albania. After four decades of isolationism during the communist regime, in which international migration was impossible and internal migration tightly controlled, everything changed in the 1990s. In the space of a census interval (1989-2001), one out of five Albanians left the country (approximately 600,000 individuals), whereas the share of urban population increased from 35% to 42%

(King 2003; Zezza et al. 2005). Demographic and development gaps, together with political and humanitarian crises – the first democratic election in 1991, the ‘pyramid crisis’ in 1997 and the war in Kosovo in 1999 – led to mass departures over the mountains toward Greece and across the sea toward Italy (King 2003). Albanians soon became half of the total immigrant population in Greece and approximately one tenth of the more heterogeneous immigrant population of Italy. Nowadays, Albanians are the second largest immigrant group in Italy – after Romanians – and still the largest immigrant group in Greece.

Duri (2016) argues that, since the 1990s, 55.7% of the population of the district of Gjirokastër emigrated, that migration mainly concerned the local Greek minority and that this was mostly directed toward Greece. Dalakoglou (2012) also notes that more than one third of the population of the town of Gjirokastër lives abroad, above all in Greece. It is now timely to look at those (few) who did not go to Greece, but went to Italy. As already mentioned, we did this *in absentia*, following the traces that they had left behind in Gjirokastër and the ties with their social networks still in place over there. We turn now to Gjirokastër, its visual landscape and soundscape as well as the narratives of its inhabitants, arising from face-to-face interviews and photo-elicitation sessions.

## **Gjirokastër**

Surrounded by the river Drino and the *Mal i Gjerë* (Wide Mountain), Gjirokastër displays its unique urban landscape (Photo No. 1).<sup>2</sup> Due to its well preserved architecture from the Ottoman period, in 1961 it was defined a ‘museum town’ and, in 2005, it became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Every five years, the town hosts the National Folklore Festival, during which Albanian traditions from Albania and the Albanian diaspora are showcased. The town is also renowned for being the birthplace of possibly the two most famous Albanians: the writer Ismail Kadare and the dictator Enver Hoxha.

As Dalakoglou (2013) notes, Gjirokastër is divided into three main parts: the old Ottoman town over the hill, the communist part down the hill and the post-communist periphery in the plain. The old part is composed of the citadel, the bazaar, museums and private dwellings – including tower houses (*kullas*). It is made of stone and subjected to restoration following the UNESCO guidelines. By contrast, the more recent expansions are characterized by blocks of flats made of cement and bricks as well as by unfinished buildings where *dordolecë* and flags keep away the evil eye. While cobbled rows and lanes are typical of the old center, the asphalted boulevard *18 Shtatori* (18 September) is the axis of the new center. Newcomers from neighboring villages and rural areas settled in this area during communism and afterward. Therefore, space has become a further term of classification in the local setting, in addition to pre-existing ethnic hierarchies and intertwined with class differences. Dalakoglou (2012) highlights the centrality of the road in the everyday life of people in Gjirokastër. In particular, the fact that the boulevard is actually the continuation of the motorway means a direct link with Greece, a symbolic connection between migrants and those left behind as well as the last/first few kilometers concretely traversed by a ‘population on the move.’

The situation of Gjirokaštër in the Albanian-Greek borderscape evolved throughout the 20th century. The border itself was drawn in 1912, when the Ottomans left, and it was only after the First World War when Gjirokaštër acquired the status of border town within the new Albanian state. In this region of Epirus, which until then had been organized around the political and economic center of the city of Ioannina, the two states implemented, over the following decades, a policy of ‘nationalization’ of the new borderscape, which resulted in the polarization of affiliations around the opposition between Greeks and Albanians. Ethnic, religious and linguistic boundaries were partly reconfigured to align with the international border. During the communist period, when the border was closed, the town was simultaneously a ‘dead end’ of Southern Albania and a strategic area where the presence of the Greek minority was perceived as a threat. With the end of the communist regime in 1991 and the beginning of the migration wave to Greece, the town once again became a place of passage, a stopover on the road to Ioannina and the rest of Greece.

These processes have left traces in family memories, in the discourses that circulate in the public space and in the urban architecture of Gjirokaštër. The constant presence of Italy until the Second World War, in various forms, is also part of this history.



Photo No. 1 – Gjirokaštër.

### **The Italian infrastructure in Gjirokaštër**

The Italian presence in the layout of Gjirokaštër is often overlooked. In the 1920s-1940s, with the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Italian Kingdom grew in importance in Albania due to increased commercial and cultural relations, and Albania started to look at the West. The development of trade between Gjirokaštër and Italy specifically resulted in the construction of Italian-style residential and commercial buildings by the local upgrading class of merchants (e.g. Hotel Sopot, Hotel Argjiro, etc.). In the same period, both the Gymnasium and the Catholic church of Gjirokaštër were built. While the gymnasium (*Gjimnazi 'Asim Zeneli'*), which was one of the first in Albania, is still operating; the Catholic church was instead demolished in the 1980s (Bilushi and Kola n.d.).

In the 1930s, at the time of the Italian invasion of Albania and before communism, the Italian congregation of sisters *Suore Basiliane Figlie di Maria Macrina (Motrat Baziliane Bijat e Shën Makrinës)* temporarily settled in Gjirokaštër (Murzaku 2009). This was a Byzantine rite congregation specific to the Albanian-speaking minority (Arbëreshë) areas of Italy. Nowadays, this congregation has returned to Albania (but not to Gjirokaštër) and

Kosovo. Only at the end of the communist regime could this resurface, with the Italian presence in Gjirokaštër. Since the 1990s, the sisters belonging to the congregation ‘Daughters of Christ the King’ (*Bijat e Krishtit Mbret*) have been living in Gjirokaštër. This congregation was founded in Granada by José Gras y Granollers in 1866, but is based in Rome and spread all over Spain, Italy, Albania, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Senegal and Togo. The sisters serve the local Catholic community in terms of evangelization, education, care, support of women and family ministry. Upon their arrival in Gjirokaštër, the sisters provided vocational classes for women (e.g. sewing, cooking, etc.) as well as Italian language classes. Then, as reported by our research participants, the establishment of both the Catholic church and the Italian school was promoted by the local population. At the time of our fieldwork, there were approximately 80 Catholic churchgoers in Gjirokaštër, most of them newly baptized,<sup>3</sup> according to our participants. The Catholic church of Gjirokaštër is located beside the residence of the sisters (Photo No. 2) and, in the same complex, the private school *Xhuzepe Gras*<sup>4</sup> – commonly referred to as the ‘Italian school’ of Gjirokaštër – is also located.



Photo No. 2 – Catholic Church at *Qëndra Xhuzepe Gras*.

The school itself is administered by the sisters and recognized by the Albanian Ministry of Education. The Albanian curriculum is taught by Albanian teachers, while Italian language classes are given by the sisters themselves. The school was opened in the 2000s, first as a pre-school and later as a primary school. Approximately 250 pupils, irrespectively of their religious affiliation, attend the school. The school *Xhuzepe Gras* is considered a well-equipped modern school, which provides didactic material from Italy and Spain in addition to the Albanian one. Referring to this, our research participants defined the school ‘aligned to European standards’ and ‘bringing in a new mentality.’ Extra-curricular activities such as theatre, birthday parties, summer camps, etc. are also provided and perceived as an important way to build a strong sense of community among the families of the pupils. Unfortunately, at the time of our fieldwork, the school was closed for summer holidays and the sisters were in Italy, so that we could not gather further information nor visit the complex *Qëndra Xhuzepe Gras*.

We also found that not only were the Catholic church and the Italian school intertwined, but so too were the school and the honorary consulate, as shown by the fact that the honorary



consul was the former director of the school *Xhuzepe Gras*. In fact, Gjirokastër hosts one of the few Italian honorary consulates in Albania, which opened in 2011 (Photos No. 3 and No. 4). Through the consulate, cultural and commercial cooperation with Italy is promoted. This includes the archaeological mission of the University of Macerata in the site of Hadrianopolis, and partnerships between the University *Eqrem Çabej* of Gjirokastër and several Italian universities (Bologna, Perugia, Siena, etc.), supporting courses on the Italian language and culture, traineeship, grants, etc.

Although we had no time to elaborate this further, it seems that the Italian presence in contemporary Gjirokastër needs to be apprehended through the legacies and memories of the pre-World War II period and not only in relation to recent migration flows. Traces of both periods are intermingled.



Photo No. 3 – The Italian honorary consulate.

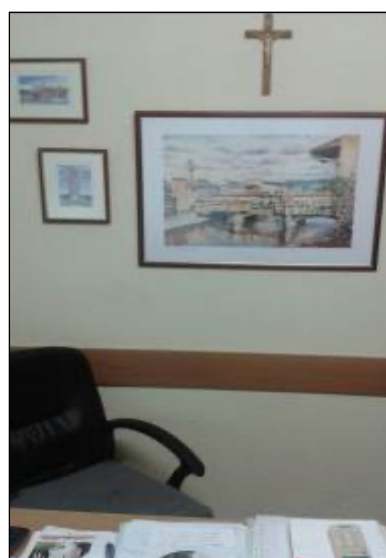


Photo No. 4 – Office of the Honorary Consul.

### **Visual landscape and soundscape in Gjirokastër**

Our fieldwork in Gjirokastër started in a photography studio located in the old town center, where a faded picture of Mother Teresa (born Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu) with sunglasses and one of the Greek popstar Sakis Rouvas were hung beside the poster of the *Blues Brothers* cut from the Italian weekly news magazine *L'Espresso* (Photo No. 5). John Belushi, one of the original *Blues Brothers*, and his brother Jim, another successful American actor, were not only Albanian-American, but their family actually originated in Southern Albania and was Orthodox. All the pictures which referred to Italy were from cinema and television, showing the key role that media played at the beginning of the Albanian post-communist migration and even in the late communist period (King and Mai 2008). Then, we continued our research in another photography studio, in the newer part of the town, where a Kodak advertizing poster in Italian was displayed (Photo No. 6).



Photo No. 5 – Collage of Italian and Greek magazine clippings.



Photo No. 6 – Advertising poster in Italian.

Going down the boulevard, we came across the local branch of the Italian bank Intesa Sanpaolo (Photo No. 7), a store selling second-hand clothes from Italy and Switzerland (Photo No. 8) as well as a bookstore where Italian-language books were available. We also found the banner of the previous year's 'Week of the Italian Language in the World' – promoted by the Italian embassy and the Italian Institute of Culture in Tirana – being reused (upside-down) as a fence (Photo No. 9).

Not far from the Italian school, the writing on the wall, '*Io e te tre metro [sic] sopra il cielo*' (i.e. 'Me and you three steps over heaven'), reminded us of streets in Italy, where graffiti inspired by the 2004 Italian teen movie *Tre metri sopra il cielo* could be found (Photo No. 10). Moreover, restaurants, pizzerias and cafés often had Italian-sounding names such as *Coloseo (sic)* or *Cielo*, among those visited. In the latter, pictures of Rome and Verona were displayed indoors and Albanian flags outdoors. There, in front of Turkish coffee served in *Lavazza* cups, one of our research participants, Stela<sup>5</sup>, showed us digital pictures of her sister, married to an Italian man and living in Italy.

Referring to this, we also met a few Italian-Albanian couples visiting the castle of Gjirokastër. There, archaeological finds from the excavations in collaboration with the University of Macerata and interwar artifacts – among which were also documents in Italian language – were displayed. In particular, in Photo No. 11 and Photo No. 12, we can see two war posters, from the weekly newspapers *La Domenica del Corriere* and *La Tribuna Illustrata*, showing the "Italian heroism vs the Albanian betrayal" in Babicë, Vlorë (1920) and "the Albania population 'enthusiastically welcoming' Italian soldiers" in 1939.



Photo No. 7 – Intesa Sanpaolo bank in Gjirokastrë.



Photo No. 8 – Second-hand clothing store from Italy and Switzerland.



Photo No. 9 – ‘Week of the Italian Language in the World’ upside-down banner.



Photo No. 10 – Italian language writing on the wall.



Photo No. 11 – *La Domenica del Corriere* in the castle of Gjirokastrë.



Photo No. 12 – *La Tribuna Illustrata* in the castle of Gjirokastrë.

Besides the public visual landscape, we found traces of Italy in digital and analog family photographs, as exemplified by the picture of Flutura in Venice. Flutura is a Muslim elderly

lady living in the old town. She has three children abroad: one in Italy and two in Greece. In

her photo albums we see Greece only through the private dimension of family get-togethers at home (e.g. Photo No. 13), while Italy is shown as an exterior setting for individual portraits and a touristic gaze (e.g. Photo No. 14).



Photo No. 13 – Flutura in Greece.



Photo No. 14 – Flutura in Italy.

Sontag (1977) notes that, through photographs, each family constructs not only a portrait and a chronicle of the self, but also a portable kit of images bearing witness to its connectedness. Bourdieu (1965) defines family photography as the “domestic fabrication of domestic emblems”. The practice of combining different images in order to craft an appropriate picture to one’s purpose is well known in Albania due to the scarcity of photographic material in the past. Contemporary photography can be seen as a form of agency. This is particularly true when it is applied to family photography, where it is used primarily to shape visual connection between family members. Secondly, photography functions to keep this connection in the case of distant relations where landscapes and habits are deconstructed and reconstructed for the purposes of both migrants and kin left behind. The display of the photographs results from a selection process, in which social actors impose their agency in selecting and deciding their representation and interpretation of the family past, present and future. In Flutura’s collection, the photographs representing the distant past during the communist regime were kept in old photo albums and envelopes, although the images were unglued and carelessly displayed. Only distant past photographs of close family members (husband, mother, etc; Photo No. 15) were among those included in the collection of present times through family photographs, enclosed in a well curated new album. However, its vivid blue cover with a drawing of a little ‘lucky’ horse for children seems to indicate its affective value.

Moreover, while the distant past photographs of close family members, together with those of the migrant family, were framed and displayed in the bedroom; the past photographs of the deceased husband was displayed in the living room. We also found out that the framed photographs of close family members were visually included in the newly made analog/digital photos across different generations – becoming a sort of ‘pictures in the pictures’ (Photo No. 16 and Photo No. 17). This practice makes it possible to include

relatives who are absent due to migration into the everyday life of those left behind and guarantee a sort of continuity to the family in its place of origin.



Photo No. 15 – Distant past photos together with the new album displayed on the table.



Photo No. 16 – ‘Picture in the picture’ at home.



Photo No. 17 – ‘Picture in the picture’ abroad.

Furthermore, we noticed that the visual landscape and soundscape of Gjirokaštër somehow show opposite patterns. In fact, while there were plenty of Italian signs in public places, there were only few signs written in the Greek language (e.g. the Greek consulate, the patisserie *Kalimera*<sup>6</sup>). Similarly, we could hear the Italian language being spoken in the bazaar, in the castle and in the consulate, whereas Greek was often spoken in private dwellings – possibly because many migrants spent their summer holidays in Albania, in addition to the fact that there is a substantial Greek minority in town.

### **Narratives from photo-elicitation and face-to-face interviews**

Tracking migration from Gjirokaštër to Italy also became a way to understand ethnic relations in Gjirokaštër, as further shown in the stories of two research participants: Nertil and Stela. Nertil is a Muslim middle-aged man whose three siblings live in Italy. In particular, one sister of his lives in an Arbëreshë village as her husband belongs to the Albanian minority of Italy. According to him, she was among the first Albanians to migrate,

in a time when migration was not even possible, although she managed through the National Folklore Festival. In fact, even during communism, Albania did not cut off relations with the Albanian diaspora and the promotion of traditional music and dances. Nertil also reported that his sister was baptized Catholic in Italy and so were all his nephews and nieces – with the sole exception of his two brothers. Even Nertil's children were baptized and were attending the Italian school of Gjirokastër.

Stela is a young university student living in Gjirokastër. She has one sister and one brother there, and another sister of hers lives in Italy, married to an Italian man. Both Stela and her sister living in Gjirokastër were baptized, took a Catholic name and attended Italian language classes in the school *Xhuzepe Gras*. According to Stela, the Italian language 'opens the doors' to the West and it should be seen in the perspective of studying abroad, which, especially among young female students, means migration and settlement abroad. However, learning the Italian language is considered useful not only to facilitate this life-project, but also to keep in touch with the kin living in Italy. In fact, on the one side, the Italian language is not widely known among Albanian youth anymore – as it was in the 1990s and 2000s – and, on the other side, the Albanian second generation in Italy often lacks language skills suitable to communicate with the kin still living in Albania.

Therefore, we can see that within transnational families, migration is still seen as a possibility among those left behind and especially for the next generation. As a consequence, both conversion to Catholicism and learning the Italian language may happen either *before* or *after* migration. It happened after migration in the case of the 'pioneer migrants,' who were the first in the family to migrate and, in the cases mentioned above, to intermarry. It happened after kin's migration, in the case of those who stayed behind – perhaps not for long. In all these case-studies, migration tended to be a family affair, which involves grandparents spending months abroad to see their children and grandchildren; young cousins learning Italian to communicate online; but also nephews who do not come back to visit Albania anymore – as they feel that they have become 'true Italian' (the phrase of Stela '*Italiano vero*' recalls Toto Cotugno's song *L'Italiano*). Therefore, the pictures, either on a smartphone or in a photo album, can show not only the tie between the relatives left behind in Gjirokastër and their migrant kin in Italy, but also the type of mobility acquired as a consequence of the kin's migration.

## **Conclusion**

Going back to our research questions – *How is the Italian presence displayed in public and private spaces in Gjirokastër? How is it linked with the Albanian migration to Italy? Are there recurring patterns of migration from Gjirokastër to Italy?* – we can now attempt to provide an answer.

First, the Italian presence in Gjirokastër is publicly visible in chronological 'layers' displaying different historical times of the place, but also of migration. The museums incorporate the oldest visible information sending us back to the period between the 1920s-1930s, with war posters from Italian newspapers from the Second World War, followed by a gap of around 50 years. After communism, in the 1990s, the Italian language resurfaced in

photography collages about television and cinema from Italian magazines. The Italian presence became then more visible in the 2000s. The Italian bank Sanpaolo was the first public place along with cafés and restaurants to display the Italian language at street level. During the same period the Italian school developed its educational activities. After 2011, the Italian visual presence outdoors became more institutionalized with the establishment of the Italian honorary consulate.

Currently, Italy has a consolidated *visible* presence in public spaces, with commercial and institutional meaning (cafés, restaurants, pizzerias, clothing stores, school, church, consulate) but *not (loudly) audible*. In fact, the Italian language is a hidden audible presence mainly indoors (museums, institutions, commercial places, etc.), while, outdoors, the sound is heard only sparsely, e.g. the voice of a girl whispering to us from a terrace. Moreover, although the Italian language is visibly displayed, in many cases, we witnessed a process of instrumentalization as well as local appropriation as exemplified by the above-mentioned café *Cielo* and *Coloseo*. In the case of the café *Coloseo* we can see, for instance, how its reputation has been linked with that of the Colosseum via the Albanian (mis)spelling of the Italian word *Colosseo* (instead of the Albanian translation *Koloseumi*). This could suggest that the Italian language which is present in Gjirokastër nowadays is not only the official language of the institutions (church, school and consulate), but it is also a spoken language filtered by migration. In misspelled names of restaurants or mistaken graffiti, we can see how the Italian language has been reinterpreted by its inhabitants (returnees, migrants, kin left behind) and how, also through their agency, it has become part of the urban landscape of Gjirokastër. Besides public spaces, the presence of Italy is *visible* also in physical and virtual private spaces such as family albums, smartphones, social networks, etc. as a function of the family rather than in itself. Privately, it is *audible* in Catholic naming and, according to the research participants, also in the domestic use of the language among the new generation partly in Gjirokastër and partly abroad. Therefore, within the context of an extended family, the Italian language seems to be instrumentally used to keep in touch and communicate specially between the descendants of the migrants and of those left behind. Besides this, the Italian language is appropriated as a part of life projects, especially when it comes to young women going to study in Italy.

Second, we have seen that the Southern Albanian border area is characterized by historical conflict between Albanians and Greeks, which in the town of Gjirokastër is also fuelled by the presence of Orthodox and Greek-speaking Albanians. In the narratives of our research participants, Greece and Greeks were always connotated negatively, e.g. with reference to education, gender roles, etc. Obviously, we need to take into account also the composition of our research group (Italian, French, Romanian communicating in Italian, Albanian, English). However, this negativity seemed to be closely related to the context rather than to our positionality. In fact, although Italy has been a secondary destination of migration from Gjirokastër, there have also been cases of two-stage migration from Greece to Italy – which has been seen as a kind of upgrade. References to Italy, in Gjirokastër, can thus be understood as status symbols to appropriate and instrumentalize. In particular, both the Catholic religion and the Italian language seem to work as tools for social mobility on an individual basis. The Italian presence in town is only indirectly linked with migration to Italy but rather refers to religion and education – namely, the core dimensions of the vernacular

category of ‘culture’ in Southern Albania (de Rapper 2008). In particular, the Italian language and the Catholic religion, in Gjirokaštër, could be seen as identity markers for Muslim Albanians seeking social status upgrade against Orthodox Albanians locally. This post-communist identity is framed within historical continuity and refers to a symbolic system of ethnic stereotypes and moral codes which defines social distance and actually maintain the boundary between Muslims and Orthodoxes. On the other hand, it also refers to another symbolic system of visions of the past, in which Italy – rather paradoxically, given the fact that Albania was actually invaded in 1939 – is valued as a support of Albania, whereas Greece appears as a recurring threat to the existence of the Albanian nation. Therefore, Muslim identity, which is constructed *in opposition to* Orthodox Christians in Gjirokaštër, could then become constructed, through Italy, *with* Catholic Christians as a proxy of the West and third pole of boundary-making (Gossiaux 2002). This is why we hypothesize that migration to Italy mediates identity processes in Gjirokaštër, a starting point perhaps for future ethnographic research.

In any case, we can conclude that references to Italy are part of a borderscape which is altogether dominated by the distinction between Albanians and Greeks. The Italian presence in the urban space as well as in individual and family trajectories is certainly less strong in Gjirokaštër than in other Albanian cities such as Shkodër, Durrës or Vlorë, not to mention the capital Tirana. As we have seen, the history of Gjirokaštër, since 1912, is marked by its inclusion in an emerging Greek-Albanian borderscape; moreover, recent developments tended to reinforce the Greek presence in the town. Nevertheless, the international border is not the only factor shaping this borderscape. Our research, following studies on this border and beyond, suggests that local boundary-making processes are also at work. These are correlated with the international border, but also draw on other resources. In this context, links with Italy seem to constitute a third pole that adds to the binary relationship between Albanians and Greeks. Therefore, in spite of its discreet character, the Italian presence in Gjirokaštër is nonetheless significant and it acts as a reminder that the sometimes tense relationship between Albanians and Greeks is not the only horizon of the borderscape.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank our reviewers and the editors of this Special Issue – Davide Carnevale and Thomas Wilson – for their valuable comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> All photos were taken by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> The apostolic administration of Southern Albania also includes the Albanian Byzantine Catholic Church.

<sup>4</sup> The Italian Catholic school of Gjirokastrë is named after José Gras (in Spanish language), the founder of the congregation ‘Daughters of Christ the King’, whose name is translated in Italian as *Giuseppe Gras* and, thence, written in Albanian language as *Xhuzepe Gras*.

<sup>5</sup> Research participants’ names are pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup> This is especially interesting, if we think that return migrants often name their own business after the place of migration.

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