

**The Albanian Aromanians' Awakening:
Identity Politics and Conflicts in
Post-Communist Albania**

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The Albanian Aromanians' Awakening: Identity Politics and Conflicts in Post-Communist Albania¹

Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers²

ABSTRACT

Today, many thousands of Aromanians (also known as „Vlachs“) live quite compactly in Northern Greece, Macedonia (FYROM) and southern Albania; and there are still traces of Vlach-Aromanian and Aromanian populations in Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia and Romania. In Albania, they were recently estimated at about 200,000 by the English scholar Tom Winnifrith. In Albanian communist times, Aromanians were not recognised as a separate minority group, officially considered to be almost completely assimilated. However, in the early post-communist transition period, a vivid Aromanian ethnic movement emerged in Albania and it became part of a recent global Balkan Aromanian initiative. The Albanian Aromanians' new emphasis of their ethnicity can be seen as a pragmatic strategy of adjustment to successes and failures in the Albanian political transition and to globalisation. It is exactly the re-vitalisation of the conflict between followers of a pro-Greek and a pro-Romanian Aromanian identification that serves to broaden the scope of options for potential exploitation.

Introduction

Over a decade ago Ernest Gellner claimed that

„there is a very large number of potential nations on earth. Our planet also contains room for a certain number of independent or autonomous political units. On any

¹ For original suggestions and encouragement on this paper I especially wish to thank Prof. Steven Sampson. From 1994 to 1997 research on the Aromune (Vlach) people in Albania was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (The German Research Council) through the interdisciplinary „Graduiertenkolleg“ (*Transition processes ...*) of the Osteuropa-Institut, Free University Berlin, as part of my PhD project. I owe much gratitude to numerous Aromune informants, their cooperation and hospitality, especially to the Aromune priest from Korça, Dimitraq Veriga, and namely also to Robert and Elida Chollaku, Niko Simaku and Elvis Toci; and to practical help and cooperation from academic colleagues, namely Agron Xhagolli, Tirana, and John Nandris, London; as well as Maria Todorova, Anastasia Karakasidou, Stefan Troebst, Thede Kahl and Farimah Daftary for discussing and improving this paper which had been presented at the 1998 AAASS convention in Florida. An earlier version was presented at the first conference of Balkan Anthropology in 1996 in Sofia and was published in *Ethnologia Balkanica* 2/1998, pp. 167-184.

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reasonable calculation, the former number (of potential nations) is probably much, *much* larger than that of possible viable states.“ (Gellner 1983:2)

Aromanians or Vlachs define themselves as a people, basing ideas of ethnic or cultural cohesion on criteria of language, religion, descent, common history and former socio-professional specialisation. Thus, Aromanians certainly qualify as one of the „sleeping beauty nations“ as coined by Gellner. A description provided in 1900 by Sir Charles Eliot under the pseudonym „Odysseus“ in his travel account „Turkey in Europe“ (and brought to my attention by Nandris 1987:27), still seems amazingly valid in giving an impression of Aromanian omnipresence in the Balkans:

„[The Aromanians] remind us of one of those ingenious pictures in which an animal or human face is concealed so as not to be obvious on first inspection, though when once seen it appears to be the principal feature of the drawing. In the same way one may live and travel in the Balkan lands without seeing or hearing anything of the Vlachs, until one's eyes are opened. Then one runs the risk of going to the opposite extreme and thinking, like Roumanian patriots, that most of the inhabitants of Macedonia [as well as of Greece and Albania] are Vlachs in disguise.“ (Odysseus 1900: 409 ff)

Today, many thousands of Balkan Aromanians still live quite compactly in at least three south-east European state formations: in northern Greece, Macedonia (FYROM) and southern Albania; and there are still traces of Vlach-Aromanians and pockets of Aromanian populations in Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia and Romania. Early and more recent documentation of Balkan life suggests total populations between a couple of thousand, ten thousand or up to a few hundred thousand Aromanians in these states. In Albania [see Map], they were recently estimated at about 200,000 by the English scholar Tom Winnifrith who is widely regarded as a most impartial observer.³ This figure seems to fill the huge gap between the figures concerning the Greek minority in Albania given by Albanian sources at about 60,000 and the Greek official statistics of „Greeks“ in Albania of 300 - 400,000. In the national Greek view, Hellenic cultural heritage is seen as passed

³ According to a personal conversation with Tom Winnifrith in 1998, cf. Winnifrith 1995:68, cf. idem 1992 and Balamaci 1993:5. Winnifrith increased these figures after repeated travels through Southern Albania. In his most recent estimate of 200,000 he includes all those who think of themselves as Vlachs / Aromanians in terms of descent with or without knowledge of the language as well as those who speak the language but do not refer to a distinct identity.

on through Byzantine culture to the Greek Orthodox religion today. Religion, as a criterion of classification, automatically places all the Albanian Aromanians, and also those people who call themselves Albanian Orthodox, into the „Greek minority.“

Internationally, they are known as „Vlachs“ or as „Aromanians.“ The latter term is derived from their self-designation as *Aromân* or *Rromâne* (or *Armân* or *Rraman*) which indicates their Romance mother tongue which gives the Romanians reasons to regard them as part of their own culture.⁴ Albanians call them either *Vlleh* or *Çoban* (meaning: „pastoralist“) which indicates their original socio-professional specialisation, or *Llaci-face* (similar to the Serbian designation *Zinzar* which has an offensive touch and is derived from the sound of their language).

In Albanian communist times they were not recognised as a separate minority group, officially considered to be almost completely assimilated and hence absorbed into the population statistics. One might hypothesise that the Aromanian identity continued to exist, latently, during the communist period. However, among my interviewees, there were people who only learned that they were „Aromanian“ four or five years ago, as well as others who felt that their Aromanian identity was suppressed, endangered or lost during the communist period.

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 global Balkan Aromanian initiative. In 1997, the Freiburg „Union für aromunische Sprache und Kultur“ under the leadership of Vasile Barba, a well-known diaspora activist, succeeded in leading the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, without any Greek participation however, to formulate a recommendation for

⁴ Weigand (1895:vii) was the first to propose „Aromune“ as an ethnonym for international scientific usage, deduced from the emic designation „Aromân.“ „Vlachs“ or alb. *Vlleh*, Greek *βλάχοι*, South-slavic *Vlasi*, German *Vlachen* (first mentioned by Thunmann 1774) all derive from Germanic *walhos* (c.f. Dahmen 1982). The German-speaking Swiss call the French-speaking Swiss (Suisse romands) „Welsch,“ a term derived from the same root and which, like all the above-mentioned terms, designates a Romance-language speaking people. In South East European usage, however, this meaning was weakened in favour of a diminutive depiction for a pastoral and semi-nomadic people.

the protection of Aromanian culture and language in its host-countries (Council of Europe 1997). To follow Gellner's mythic imagery, it will be the objective of this paper to define who, or what, was the „prince“ who gave the kiss of life to Aromanians in Albania.

The Aromanian Question and Assimilation

In fact, the new ethnic movement in many respects resembles a turn-of-the-century phenomenon. Without having received much attention in South East European history, there had been a short-lived but quite successful Aromanian national movement which culminated in their recognition as an Aromanian *millet* („nation“) in May 1905 in Constantinople with the support of the Great Powers (prominently by Austria-Hungary). The „Aromanian Question“ in the period from the middle of the last century until 1905 was described brilliantly and in great detail in a doctoral thesis in 1974 by MaxDemeter Peyfuss, an Austrian historian of partly Aromanian descent (Peyfuss 1974). From this thesis one can draw an understanding of the typical structure of Balkan national movements; the leading actors of identity politics who imported national ideas from urban centres abroad (in this case mainly from Bucharest); how ethnically based associations were founded; schools and education promoted, attempts to develop a standardised written language and literacy programmes pursued; and popular traditions transformed into „folklore.“

Among the reasons Peyfuss gives in order to explain why, despite all this, the Aromanians still failed to form a separate nation-state, are:

1. They were seeking independence within a framework—that of the Ottoman Empire—which itself was in the process of disintegration.

2. As a tool of Romanian nationalist Balkan politics competing mainly with Greek agendas, they themselves were split in a destructive conflict between either a pro-Romanian or a pro-Greek orientation.
3. Escalating violence imposed on Aromanians by Greek nationalists in the Civil War and Balkan Wars emerged as a reaction to Romanian propaganda activities and Romanian support for ethnic schools and churches on Greek territory, and eventually suppressed any further Aromanian separatist attempts.
4. Pro-Romanian Aromanian nationalists eventually sought emancipation in the newly-formed Albanian nation-state while the others were assimilated into the Greek nation and participated in the Greek nationalist movement.

There were, however, very different attitudes among different groups of Aromanians in relation to the national movements they had to cope with. Those Aromanians who, well into this century, preserved their socio-professional identity and continued to practice transhumant pastoralism until the newly-founded nation-states „colonialised“ their territory and set up impermeable political borders, conceived nationalism as counter-productive. As one old Albanian Aromanian shepherd once explained to me, reflecting on his life: „We did not need or want any nation because borders hindered our mobility between winter and summer pastures“ (1995, interview Vithkuqe).

On the other hand, many authors have pointed out how, „by melting into their host nation,“ the Vlachs or Aromanians became „the best Greeks,“ „the best Macedonians,“ and also the „best Albanians“ (though, due to Albanian isolationism during the communist period, there was not much known until recently about the latter). Nicholas Balamaci, a second generation member of the American diaspora, has convincingly explained how integrating or identifying with the host nation and taking part in its development proved to be an early road to modernisation—besides turning out to be the road to assimilation—for *former* mountain Vlachs (Balamaci 1991).

In sedentarisation, literacy programmes, and migration and urbanisation processes, many former semi-transhumant mountain pastoralists managed, polyglots as they were, to transform spatial mobility into social mobility. They thus became part of the Balkan bourgeoisie while participating in and promoting their respective host-states' national movements. Thus, many national heroes referred to in today's national historiography are known among Aromanians as actually having been Aromanians, such as, for example, the former Greek conservative party leader Averoff, or—in the Albanian case—the famous Frasheri Brothers, considered to be the most important figures of the Albanian national movement. They originate from the same Albanian village that the Albanian Aromanians also known as „Frasherliote“ (= people from Frasheri) are said to come from.

If a failed Aromanian national movement and a more or less forced homogenisation process in 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 ethnicity be seen as the result of transition, i.e. of re-privatisation, the new freedom of religion, the emergence of party politics, globalisation, or some other innovations in society? If transition, according to Steven Sampson,⁵ means „insecurity in time and space,“ what advantages does a renaissance of identity give? For example, does it supply new structures and new modes of orientation (as could be assumed by applying ritual theory to political transition, cf. Turner 1969)? Does a newly emphasised ethnicity prove beneficial in coping with the difficult, novel realities, and under what conditions does it really matter? When does it not? Finally, under what circumstances does an emotional attachment develop and the newly discovered ethnicity become „emotionally internalized“ (cf. Verdery 1990)?

I would like to argue that the Albanian Aromanians' new emphasis of their ethnicity can be seen as a pragmatic strategy of adjustment to successes and failures in the Albanian political transition and also to globalisation. In juxtaposition to Peyfuss's historical analysis I would like to stress that, today, it is exactly the revitalisation 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.

Aromanian Identity Renaissance in Albania ("the Awakening")

In 1991, with the liberalisation of the political situation in Albania, the Aromanians started to organise themselves. Two Aromanian men in Selenica (near the harbour city of Vlora, mid-central Albania) and two in Korça (south-east Albania), all involved in cultural work mainly through Albanian and Aromanian folk music, working independently, began constructing a statute for an Aromanian cultural association. They were then introduced through the then Romanian ambassador in Tirana and worked together to found a common association.⁶ The first Association of Aromanian Albanians was recognised by the Albanian Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in October 1991 as a „cultural group,“ and as the second largest group after the Albanians, but not as a „minority.“

After this initial success, a first Congress of Albanian Aromanian People was held. In addition to many Albanian Aromanians, a large number of diaspora Aromanians from Macedonia, Romania, Greece, Germany, France, and the USA participated in this conference. Folklore groups performed and declarations emphasised the important contributions of Aromanian people to culture and development in Albania and elsewhere. Apparently, these events were meant to stimulate pride and to stress the importance of a collective identity. Hence, the Albanian Aromanians learned the so-called „Aromanian National Anthem“ at the first conference they were able to organise and attend. Long known in the diaspora, this anthem, a fiercely ethnicist nineteenth-century poem by Constantin Belimace called „the will of the forefathers,“ calls for the maintenance of the

⁵ Discussion in Albania, August 1996, c.f. also Sampson 1995 [a] and 1995 [b]

⁶ This is a version of oral history I heard from the Aromanian priest of Korça.

Romance language.⁷ Since this first conference, many other conferences and folklore events have taken place on a large scale.

⁷ Balamaci points to the violent and conservative wording: „... from beneath their gravestones/ Our good parents cry out:/ We curse you if you have at home/ Someone who leaves his language// ... let him be burned by flames/ let him be destroyed alive where he stands ...“ (Balamaci 1989: 13).

Associations and Factions

In 1996 and 1997, there were branches of the Aromanian associations founded in late 1991 in probably every city and many villages of central and southern Albania. In many cities one could find at least one local Aromanian association board, including a president, a vice-president and a secretary. These cause some confusion to the outside observer because there were often two parallel local associations governed by different boards. This is due to a split in the first association of 1991, resulting in legal registrations of new Aromanian (or Vlach) associations in 1993 (Korça) and 1995 (Vlora) and indicative of the fact that the followers of the initial Selenica (Vlora) group stood in opposition to the initial Korça group. This situation reminds one of a common joke heard among young people in Tirana referring to what is conceived as an Albanian characteristic: „There are as many presidents (or chairmen) as Albanians in Albanian democracy.“

In fact, the registration documents of the different groups, as collected in Vlora and Tirana in 1996 and 1997 show some interesting irregularities. Comparing the lists of names of founding members, the transfer of loyalty by some individuals becomes evident. By moving from one association to another, these Aromanians chose to switch from a pro-Romanian to a pro-Greek faction, and vice versa. When some of them were interviewed, former power struggles over positions in the associations were exposed. Aside from leadership conflicts, the disagreements were indicated through giving slightly different names and statutes to the evolving association. In 1995 and 1996, the Aromanian interviewees differentiated between a so-called „pro-Greek“ wing (or „Albanian Vlachs“) with political as well as cultural aims, and a „pro-Romanian“ (or „Albanian Aromanian“) wing with explicitly non-political, cultural objectives.

There is a tendency among many members of the pro-Greek faction to be active in, or supportive of, the Human Rights Party. This party is the successor to the former politically dubious „Omonia,“ which was said to have been in close contact with fundamentalist, nationalistic Greek circles before the Greek president Kostas Simitis

came to power. Under Berisha's government, „Omonia“ became illegal and was banned (cf. Kadritzke 1998).

In contrast, many of the pro-Romanian followers based in Korça and Tirana still remember the Romanian-supported Aromanian schools and the Aromanian churches from personal experience in post-communist times. They eagerly engage in the revival of these institutions, giving Aromanian language courses to the youngsters and assisting and supporting Aromanian church rituals. In teaching Aromanian, missing words are consciously replaced by Romanian words, and Romanian religious texts serve as a basis for the liturgy which is also partly performed in either the Aromanian or the Albanian language. Thus, as brought to my attention by Thede Kahl, the factual existence of an original Aromanian liturgy (*Liturghier armînesc*) from the beginning of the 18th century, discovered by Ilo Mitkë-Qafëzezi in Korça and published in 1962 by Caragiu Marioteanu, is ignored. In recent years, this text has been reprinted and circulated among Albanian Aromanians with the support of the Aromanian diaspora, and can therefore be considered to be known by the Aromanian church activists of Korça. However, the text is printed in Greek letters, and therefore conceived of as alien by this faction which exclusively refers to Latin writings. In this, they reproduce another feature of the pre-communist pro-Romanian movement among Balkan Aromanians. Like the Aromanian priest of Korça, these pro-Romanian activists tended to identify with the ruling Democratic Party since they felt grateful for their new opportunities and were also supported by bilateral friendship ties between Romania and Albania and presidents Berisha and Iliescu. With the practical disintegration of Albania in 1997 and accompanying immense disappointment with Berisha's Democratic party, many of these former supporters leaned towards even more conservative, monarchist parties which were left as the only alternative to the „Democrats“ or the „Socialists.“

Both groups construct discourses defining their ethnic identity in terms of their either Greek or Romanian preference.

„Discursive interfaces“

Romanian scholars (cf. as a classic: Capidan 1937; Papahagi 1932) and also members of the Aromanian diaspora in the Boston area in the USA, Germany and France classify the Albanian Aromanians among the so-called Macedo-Romanian or Southern-Danube Romance culture. Simply summarised, they base this cultural concept on linguistic evidence that the Aromanian language is a Romanian dialect. Second, it is based on the conception of historical continuity from the Thracians or Dacians. Many of my Albanian Aromanian interviewees agree with this, although with the slight variation of extending the idea to include the ancient Illyrian tribes. The idea of claiming direct descent from the Illyrians is taken from Albanian national historiography and makes the Albanian Aromanians „perfect“ Albanians. In short, the Aromanian people are believed to be the descendants of various ancient romanised autochthonous tribes which were dispersed throughout South East Europe over time.

Actors of the pro-Romanian wing, however, consciously avoid taking into account the idea of any possible relation to the ancient Hellenes. They say the ancient Greeks were „of no importance, they lived only around Athens, on the Peloponnesos and on the islands.“ In some villages, I also heard a variant that Aromanians once came from Romania through emigration. People of this faction feel—as some of my interviewees said—a kind of „nostalgia for Romania,“ where the „old culture“ is preserved, and where they easily understand the language. Historically, there were also commercial links between bourgeois Albanian Aromanian traders and sedentary Aromanian craftsmen of prosperous southern Albanian cities with their counterparts in Romania until the Second World War. The pro-Romanian faction still remembers this connection from their family histories. At the same time, they always emphasise their patriotic feelings towards Albania. They proudly point out that the leading figures of the Albanian national movement were Aromanians. One of the interviewees in 1996 showed me a copy of a map of an old nationalistic Albanian book from 1913. The copy I received was called „The True Albania“. Later I learned that it derived from the work of the first academic

Albanian geographer Ahmet Gashi. A similar original ethnic map was titled „Ethnic Albania“ where Albania extends far into Greek territory, as far south as Preveza. These maps would add today's Greek Epiros to Albania as well as Kosovo.

In contrast, leaders of the „pro-Greek“ faction explained to me that Aromanians are romanised Hellenes. This view is also shared for example by the Greek scholar Achilles Lazarou (1976, 1994) whose papers are translated and published by this Albanian Aromanian faction; by the Institute for „North Epiros Studies“ in Joannina; and by many Orthodox priests on the Greek side of the border.⁸ In 1994 I was given a map by a Greek priest from the border area which showed Greece extending far into Albanian territory up to the Shkumbin river near Tirana. This is also the space where the Greek minority of Albania is said to be situated. A leader of the Albanian Aromanian pro-Greek faction, confronted with the arguments of his counterparts, once simply asked me: „Did Romania exist already 2000 years ago?“

Many of the pro-Greek Aromanian families practised a nomadic pastoralism (transhumance) well into the communist period, when mobility was hindered by the impermeable political borders between Albania and Greece. Oral life histories, as tape-recorded, showed that many of them used to be convinced communist partisans, employed as experienced pathfinders and caravan leaders, and that these nomadic Aromanians conceived the new possibilities of sedentarisation resulting from the first land reform and the creation of agricultural cooperatives as a great and fair gift. However, the ones successfully exploiting the new possibilities as land owning entrepreneurs soon abandoned this positive perception. Under an Albanian policy paralleling Russian Stalinism, they became stigmatised *askulak* and, like the bourgeois urban Aromanian traders and craftsmen, they were expropriated and persecuted. On the other hand, Aromanian pastoralist and livestock competencies were welcome in

⁸ One example of the many patriotic, non-clerical contributions to this discourse: Koltsidas 1993. The fiercest clerical Greek propagandist and former Metropolitan of Drynopolis, Sevastianos, (deceased in 1994) even created a radio station for his nationalist aims in Konitsa, a city close to the southern border of Albania. Cf. for example Sevastianos 1986, later reprints and summaries published in Albanian (Sebastianos 1992) and other languages. For detailed information cf. Kadritzke 1998:233.

cooperative work. Aromanians became veterinarians, shepherds in brigade work, and dairy experts in land cooperatives. Evidently, during the post-communist transition period, many descendants from recently transhumant families started to revitalise a private, and this time sedentary, economy using livestock and dairy competencies again. They utilise old and temporarily-interrupted family relations on the Greek side of the border for commerce again. For example, in 1996 in the border area smuggling networks of goat's and ewe's milk cheese existed between Albanian and Greek Aromanian relatives.

Without judging the question of the existing political borders or of territorial claims at any time in history, there is an inner logic to both lines of argumentation. Two different discourses cut across the same people in the same territory, since they consider themselves to be one people referring to a Romance-language tradition, despite conflicting interpretations of descent and cultural belonging. Therefore, comparing the contrasting arguments of classification in categories, such as the myth of origin, descent, historical events, language, religion and territory, one can speak of discursive interfaces. There are different family history dispositions and sentiments that endorse the choice of either sense of belonging, yet people switch their discourses, as a family or individually, if such a change is opportune, as will be shown.

Social Structures and Positions

Politics of social structures and positions negotiate prestige. There is a latent struggle for prestige going on among different groups in current Albania. To set off one's exclusive group as more prestigious than the others seems to be a *leitmotiv* for everybody. The southern Albanians consider the northern mountaineers to be primitive, whereas the people in the North see the Southerners as corrupt and not trustworthy. Since Ottoman times the people of the village next door have always been looked upon with suspicion. The Muslims are considered to be weak traitors by their Christian

neighbours because they are believed to have converted under the Ottomans, or for other reasons which are always related to a structural need for constructing criteria of inclusion and exclusion according to which access to various resources is defined.

In this general atmosphere, Aromanians in Tirana explained assimilation during the communist period, when the Aromanian language was not passed on to the next generation, by the feeling of being despised when classified by urban Albanians as *Çoban* („pastoralist“). These interviewees actively and consciously intend to invert this low-prestige experience. First, they demonstrate this through retrospective discourse: „Aromanians were always very educated, standing above other people,“ and by saying that „traditional mobility was a factor to get into contact with new ideas.“ Second, prestige and power is conjured up prospectively: „soon, my children will be proud to be *coban*,“ and „the Aromanian youth will be Albania's intellectual elite in the future.“ Third, future prestige is created in action: more than 900 Aromanian students study by now in Romania.⁹ Other students and pupils attend universities and schools in Greece. The usual subjects are medicine, law, economics and international relations.

All Aromanian activists of the „pro-Romanian“ faction themselves have their children study in Romania. At the same time, access to foreign scholarships is an extremely desirable resource in Albania today. A large number of scholarships offered by the Romanian government to Albanians depend on a verified Aromanian identity. Particularly if the Aromanian language is lost, as is usually the case among the younger generation, the verification certificate is issued by the local or the central board of the „pro-Romanian“ Association of Albanian Aromanians. The leading members—since they are the ones with the contacts—mediate and either recommend the applicant as a boy or girl „from a good family“ or not. This key position, of course, entails enormous social power.

The same is true for the „pro-Greek“ counterparts: There is evidence that in 1992, without any bureaucratic troubles, visas, including official work permits (which for an average Albanian are very difficult to acquire) were handed out freely to those

Aromanian people from villages around Vlora who identified themselves as „Helleno-Vlach.“ Even today, visas are allocated by priority to Albanians who can prove a Vlach heritage. Again, leading members of the „pro-Greek“ Albanian Aromanian Association send their children to schools in Greece or have permanent economic relations with Greeks. I was told that they also use their ties to the Greek embassy and to Aromanian personal networks to mediate between the donor institution and the villages, and to recommend people.

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 would 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.

Identity Relevance Variations

Finally, Aromanian identity is not always and everywhere of relevance. It is not 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. As some interviewees explained, to emphasise a distinct identity might harm their image and

⁹ Information provided by leading members of the pro-Romanian association and by the Romanian ambassador in Tirana in 1998.

status, even though they do not necessarily believe in the available dominant discourses. A well-known Aromanian scientist in Tirana, happily married to a Muslim woman in the communist period (when mixed marriages were politically correct), confessed he would never engage in Albanian Aromanian identity politics: „There is no doubt, anyway, we stem from the Illyrians like any Albanian. We are romanised Illyrians.“

According to Tom Winnifrith, „it is in the towns where Vlachs tend to lose their identity, forgetting their Vlach speech and peculiarly Vlach way of life“ (Winnifrith 1992: 285). This seems to be generally true for Tirana, where Aromanians live dispersed, but not for Korça, where Aromanians still prefer a specific quarter, and where the middle and older generations proudly explain that during the communist period they spoke their Romance language, as they still do today as long as no other Albanian is present.

Sometimes, one family is split into two identity orientations: a son and his family might be migrant workers in Greece and the daughter might have a scholarship at a Romanian university, for example. „We know who we are, we are Albanians,“ one Korça family explained, „and we adjust to the circumstances. The historians should find out about our origin.“ For the Aromanian students in Bucharest, who are known among their fellow students as „the Albanians,“ Aromanian identity also plays a minor role. An Aromanian female student on vacation in Albania clarified: „Most of us don't know how to speak Aromanian. We know Romanian, now, and Albanian, of course. Nobody talks about Aromanian identity. We are Albanians.“ In their favourite pub where they meet, they speak only Albanian. They know that they owe being chosen to study abroad to their Aromanian descent. There are, however, also cases of one or the other Albanian friend who was able to slip through, protected by a family relationship to the responsible Aromanian officials. A number of students are descendants of mixed Albanian/Aromanian marriages. Some parents chose to inform them about their Aromanian identity only after the collapse of the communist regime. This newly achieved consciousness became relevant for them only when it offered the possibility to study in Greece or Romania.

A final example shows a sphere in which Aromanian identity is played down by the Aromanians but might be emphasised by non-Aromanian Albanians. In the land privatisation process there is a conflict with regard to the new legislation that would balance the claims of the former cooperative workers with those of the former feudal landowners. Many former transhumant Aromanian families who settled in the villages only in the early communist period feel threatened by the former landowners. In disputes about this conflict, I never heard an Aromanian point to his specific identity because this could be a liability. This was confirmed by research conducted in 1998 in a south-east Albanian village for it was shown that even non-Aromanian former semi-transhumant pastoralists are called „Vlachs“ by other villagers in order to indicate that they do not have any claim to land in terms of inheritance rights.

Despite the turmoil in Albania in early 1997, the Aromanians did not give up their newly-gained possibilities. Aromanian students were advised to stay abroad in Greece or Romania while everyone was arming themselves in Albania. Some unidentified persons attempted to burn down the „pro-Romanian“ association’s office in Tirana in 1996. This office is situated in the same building as the socialist party organ, *zëri i popullit*. The Korça church is still under construction after the money flow from Romanian and Aromanian businessmen was interrupted following the collapse of the Pyramid schemes.

Still, some Aromanians became hesitant about declaring their cultural heritage when the opposition press accused leading government officials of being of Aromanian descent, thereby attempting to disqualify them as trustworthy Albanians. This evokes memories of the late Albanian communist period when even the best-known Albanian writer, Ismail Kadare, explained the cruelties committed against Albanian people by the fact that the Politburo was composed of a quarter, if not a third, of Macedonians and Aromanians (Kadare 1991: 65; Schmidt-Neke 1993:187).

Summary and Concluding Remarks

Summarising the key points, I would like to stress that there is utilisation 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 model 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 utilise identity politics for social positions, reputation, psychological compensation of 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 utilise 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' globalising identity confers an advantage to them over non-Aromanian 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 mystical 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: they can choose between different modes of identification, or they can attribute distinct significance to different identities in various situations, referring to their pre-communist 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 of identities that makes people strong everywhere.

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