Chapter 7

Albanian Immigrants in the Greek City: Spatial ‘Invisibility’ and Identity Management as a Strategy of Adaptation

Ifigeneia Kokkali

Albanian population movements to Greece have been among the most important intra-Balkan fluxes of the end of the twentieth century. Today, Albanians form the most significant immigrant ‘stock’ in Greece; counted as 438,000 individuals in the 2001 Greek census;¹ by 2010, they were estimated to have reached 700,000 (Maroukis 2008, pp. 6–8) out of a total population of about 11 million. Over a period of less than twenty years, their migration to Greece has presented all the ‘classic’ stages of a migration movement: labour migration of young men, regularisation of the migrants’ statuses, extension of their intended stays, stabilization of the flux with the arrival of women and children, questions of incorporation, and then second-generation issues.

Unlike many other immigrant groups, however, which present high concentrations in specific cities or regions of the country, the Albanians offer a more diffused pattern. Furthermore, in the field of my investigation—Thessaloniki—one cannot refer to an ‘Albanian neighbourhood’: there are few visible signs of the Albanians’ numerically important presence that mark the urban space, such as Albanian cafés, restaurants, or grocers.

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¹ For a discussion on the problems of measuring immigrant stocks and flows in Greece and an attempt to do so, see Baldwin-Edwards with Apostolatu (2009, pp. 233–262). The aforementioned numbers include those of Greek-ethnic origin (co-ethnics/*omoyeneis* in Greek) coming from the Greek minority in Southern Albania, estimated, circa 2001, at 150,000–200,000 (see, op. cit., 241; Pavlou 2003a).

I. Kokkali (✉)

Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of Florence, Florence, Italy
e-mail: ifigeneia.kokkali@polimi.it

The study of the way in which the Albanians locate themselves in the city is revealing of their migration strategies, as well as of their modes of social insertion in the host country. The object of this chapter is to relate the physical setting of the Albanians in Thessaloniki—their ‘spatial invisibility’ as a group—to the way that many migrants (but certainly not all) reshape and negotiate or even dissimulate their ethno-national identities in Greece. As will be outlined below, these negotiations involve mainly name-changing and religious shifts: they thus suggest a collective ‘social inconspicuousness’.

This chapter draws on research materials provided by the programme ‘Supporting the Design of Migration Policies: An Analysis of Migration Flows between Albania and Greece’, commissioned by the World Bank and conducted from December 2005 to June 2006 by the Laboratory of Demographic and Social Analyses of the University of Thessaly, Greece. The sample was based on information gathered during the Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS) carried out in Albania in 2005.² Some 128 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Albanian immigrants in Greece. Of these, 29 were in-depth interviews that took place in northern Greece (including 19 in Thessaloniki) and focused on issues of adaptation and exclusion.

The chapter also relies upon statistical and cartographic analyses of data from the 2001 Greek census regarding the foreign population of Thessaloniki. Though this dataset is actually dated, its mapping produces an overall idea of the Albanians’ patterns of settlement in the city.

7.1 Albanians in Thessaloniki: A Spatially ‘Invisible’ Migratory Group

The geographical dispersion of Albanians in the Greek territory is rather balanced compared to other groups of foreigners (Kokkali 2010, pp. 132–138). According to 2001 census data, approximately 40% of all Albanians settled in the two major cities—Athens and Thessaloniki. The ratio of the Albanian population to the total population is similar for both cities and close to the country’s average;³ this ‘balanced’ spatial pattern at the national level is also visible at the local level.

After having mapped the census data of 2001, I have shown elsewhere (Kokkali 2010) that the Albanians’ mode of territorial insertion is best described as a pattern of dispersal in the urban and the suburban space, at least as far as greater Thessaloniki is concerned. At the geographical scales examined (district, commune, postal code entities), I found no large concentrations of Albanian households.⁴ In contrast, groups such as the Bulgarians, the Georgians, the Russians but also Pontic Greeks

² See: <http://go.worldbank.org/IFS9WG7EO0>.

³ The ratios of the Albanian population to the total populations of Athens, Thessaloniki and Greece overall were respectively 5, 3 and 4%.

⁴ We see a similar territorial insertion in Athens (Maloutas 2010).

who emigrated from the ex-Soviet Republics in the 1990s, are over-represented in some areas of the city, and they mark ‘ethnically’ the neighbourhoods in which they settle.⁵

In the 2001 Greek census, the district of Thessaloniki counted about one million inhabitants of which nearly 9% were foreign nationals. The Albanians accounted for 47% of the city’s foreign population, followed at a distance by the Georgians (16%), the Russians (7%) and the Bulgarians (4%).

When talking about ethnic markers in some of the city’s districts, I refer to the ethnicization of cityspace. Taboada-Leonetti (1984, p. 66) calls this ‘ethnic infrastructure’, meaning a group’s specific commercial facilities, as well as particular services and networks (e.g., places of worship, clubs, schools, and doctors). It is these services and activities which support a group’s functioning as a distinctive entity in the city of settlement, and they usually mark ethnically the urban landscape. They attribute in this way (spatial) visibility to the group in question.

In Thessaloniki, we can find several money transfer agencies and cafés that are exclusively Georgian (where everything is written in Georgian and named after Georgian cities, such as ‘Colchis’), as well as Russian restaurants and mini-markets, churches, and doctors who are ‘coloured’ ex-Soviet (where, e.g., information on the service is given in Russian) (Kokkali 2010, pp. 345–350). The Filipinos have their own places of worship and the Palestinians, too; both groups have collectively rented apartments that have been transformed into places of worship.

Albanians, however, did not adopt similar practices. They are surprisingly absent from the ethnic mosaic emerging in the city of Thessaloniki. Unlike other groups, they do not possess of any of the above-mentioned ethnic infrastructure. ‘Ethnic’ services addressed specifically to Albanians include some translation bureaus, a number of bus agencies with Albanian destinations, and the Albanian-language newspapers that hang in the kiosks and tobacco shops (Kokkali 2010, p. 336).

A study carried out in 2006 by Visoviti et al. (2006), with the task of exploring the expression of multi-ethnic cohabitation in the public spaces of Thessaloniki, identified two *piazas* for job-finding and a central square of the city with a substantial presence of Albanian migrants. Those three places are the only ones to offer a regular collective visibility of Albanians in the public space. The very large presence in the square of Albanian migrants (especially from Korçë) of all ages and both sexes, at any time of the day, resulted in the renaming of the square—at least, in the migrants’ discourse—from *Plateia Makedonomachon* (Square of the Macedonian Fighters) to *Bachtse tis Korytsas* (Garden of Korçë) or *Alvaniko parko* (Albanian Park). At the two *piazas*, Albanian men of all ages look for jobs, particularly unskilled ones. Yet, the *piazas* are not meeting points for friends or compatriots.

The piazza at the west end of the city centre (near the train station of Thessaloniki) is situated in front of the travel agencies that offer daily bus transport to Albania. This is a sector with an intense Albanian presence. The clientele of the area’s coffee shops and fast food restaurants is mostly Albanian, while, a few blocks

⁵ For more on the patterns of settlement of Pontic Greeks in Thessaloniki, see Katsavounidou and Kourti (2008).

further on, the only over-representation of Albanian households in Thessaloniki's centre is recorded (Kokkali 2010, pp. 333–335). Although it recently moved, the Albanian consulate in Thessaloniki used to be here as well, thus attracting a number of Albanian translation agencies and the only Albanian bookstore in Thessaloniki (recently closed).

Accordingly, a particular Albanian dynamics have gradually developed in the district, involving some very specific functions—finding a job, making use of the translation services, or taking a bus to Albania. Still, ethnicization of city space remains very weak, since the only 'Albanian imprint' in Thessaloniki concerns the signs of the bus agencies and those of the translation bureaus, both of which are written in Albanian. As for the above-mentioned *piazas* and the Garden of Korçë, once emptied in the afternoon they offer no sign of their previous occupation by Albanians. The Albanians' ephemeral presence, as in the district around the train station, is thus not comparable with the Pontic settlements and the Russophone centralities of the city. In other words, there is no Albanian centrality in Thessaloniki—nothing to remind us that the aforementioned places are highly frequented by Albanians. This would possibly provide some kind of visibility of the Albanian culture, including language, customs, music, and culinary habits. If we follow a definition from the Chicago School for the city centre as—among other things—the 'space of highest symbolic meaning', an Albanian centrality would be a symbolically significant place or a point of reference for the Albanian culture and lifestyles. This occurs in Little Italy for Italians in New York, in the *Quartier Latin* for the Greeks in Paris, and Brick Lane for Indians and Bangladeshi in London.

The situation elucidated suggests a remarkable 'spatial invisibility' of the Albanians. However, the way in which they take up their position in the city cannot be irrelevant to their migratory strategies and, thus, to the way their adaptation occurs in Greece. This chapter will attempt to show that the Albanians' spatial invisibility, in the sense conveyed here, constitutes a spatial expression of their strategies of adaptation. These involve identity negotiation or dissimulation and, as such, could probably be taken as an indicator of a pronounced 'social inconspicuousness' of Albanians as a group.

7.2 Identity Negotiation and Collective 'Social Inconspicuousness'

The Albanians' spatial invisibility is coupled with a set of practices that seem⁶ to aim at the dissociation of the individual from the generic Albanian group, 'the Albanians'. These practices include religion shifts and name concealing. In the abundant literature that exists on Albanian migration in Greece, it is not uncommon to find reference to these practices (De Rapper 2002a; Kretsi 2005a; Psimmenos 2001).

In summary, in the 1990s to the mid-2000s, many Albanians in Greece adopted Greek names, while many Muslim Albanians seemingly disavowed their religious

⁶ These practices may have become less important over time, since my empirical study was conducted.

affiliation, claiming to be Orthodox Christians (Kretsi 2005a, pp. 131–132; see also Kokkali 2010, pp. 293–306). Many had themselves and their children christened Orthodox, irrespective of their previous religious affiliation (Muslim or Catholic). The name thus adopted would be used in the person's contacts with Greeks, and sometimes even in the domestic sphere. As an informal practice, the name-changing was not reported in any official documents such as identity cards or passports.⁷

One third of the migrants interviewed during our empirical study in 2005–2006 admitted using a Greek name instead of their original name. My findings also showed that children born in Greece, whose parents were of Muslim or Catholic affiliation, were often christened—this being a kind of obligation for parents, as one implied: 'I have christened them [his children], that's it: I've done my duty...' (E., man, Muslim affiliation, Thessaloniki, 17 December 2005).

Agreeing to a formal ritual demanded—explicitly or implicitly—by the host society seems thus to have represented a necessary action for some parents, who wanted to give their children an opportunity to integrate in Greece and particularly into the Greek state school system. The practice of adult name-changing has similar traits; though in theory a deliberate choice, it has undoubtedly been an implicit (or not) requirement of the dominant society. In our interviewees' words it was often the Greek 'bosses', who—under the pretext that they could not pronounce the names of their Albanian employees—decided to replace them: 'I will call you Yian-nis', or even, 'What is this name? I'll call you...' (Kokkali 2010, p. 296).

The name-changing and the disavowing of the original religious affiliation are indicative but are not the only elements of a broader process of identity negotiation. Use of the term 'the Albanians' or the pronoun 'they' by our interviewees was also revealing, since they referred to the generic Albanian group without including themselves.⁸ There are thus explicit efforts to dissociate the self from 'the Albanians in Greece'. This is demonstrated even more distinctly in an expression that was frequently used at the time, 'I am not like the other Albanians'—often followed and completed by another one, 'I am a family man'. As Psimmenos (2001, pp. 190–191) explains, such attitudes underline a process of self-differentiation which results in some Albanian individuals breaking away from their co-nationals. It is obvious, however, that not *all* the Albanians react in the same way. Some of our interviewees identified strongly with the group of 'the Albanians'. These were mainly men living in Greece without a nuclear family. They socialized with co-nationals and stressed

⁷ However, it seems that official changes did take place regarding co-ethnic Greeks from Albania, as for instance in the case of S. and his wife M., both interviewed in Thessaloniki, on 15 December 2005. Georgia Kretsi (2005a, pp. 132–133), in her study of those practices in the villages of Fterra and Çorraj in Albania, maintains that there are cases in which the name had been officially changed already inside Albania. Potential migrants to Greece would take advantage of the disorganisation and corruption of the Albanian administration to falsify their documents and thus appear to the Greek authorities as having some kind of Greek origin that is a fast 'passport' to Greece. On the 'visa trading' that has taken place in the Greek consulates of Albania, see Pavlou (2003a). Gilles De Rapper (2005, p. 189) too has shown that in some villages in southern Albania, villagers (until very recently) were more than willing to manage a Greek-Albanian identity in order to enter Greece more easily and live there in a relatively privileged way.

⁸ A salient indication of a migration of community or individual type is the respective use of 'us' or 'me' when informants are interviewed (De Rudder 1987, p. 119). For Albanians in Greece, see the extracts quoted in the following section.

their indifference towards Greeks, since they ‘didn’t have anything to discuss with them’, as many of those interviewees admitted.⁹

Mai (2005, p. 553), in research on Albanians in Italy, has stressed that they proceed to a negotiation of their national identity: this is to avoid, at the individual level, the bad reputation and negative stereotype, which went hand-in-hand with the adjective ‘Albanian’, at least until the mid-2000s. The migrants have thus developed strategies to circumvent the use of the word ‘Albanian’, focusing on expressions such as ‘I come from Tirana’ or ‘I come from Albania’, rather than using the adjective itself. Erving Goffman (1963, p. 37) described in the 1960s such techniques of excision of a stigmatized word from common use.

Pavlou (2001, p. 135), drawing on critical discourse analysis, has shown that media discourses in Greece have gradually transformed the adjective ‘Albanian’ to a keyword noun that is inclusive of stereotypical behaviour and de facto a token of criminality. It is unnecessary to discuss here in detail the harsh campaign of criminalization and stigmatization that Albanian immigrants have been subjected to since 1991, as these are well-documented (Karidis 1996; Pavlou 2001, pp. 135–137; Psimmenos 2001; Tsoukala 1999; for Italy, see Mai 2005). But in light of this campaign, according to which ‘the Albanian’ rapidly became synonymous with ‘clandestine’ and ‘criminal’, the practices of dissociation from the Albanian group and, overall, the process of identity negotiation of Albanians in Greece¹⁰ seem—if not satisfactorily explained—at least logically justified.

The factor that seems to have promoted the peculiar ‘identity game’ of name-changing and claiming to be Orthodox Christian in Greece can be traced back to the catalytic presence of a Greek minority in southern Albania. The mass emigration of its members to Greece, together with the preferential treatment they received from the Greek state and society (at least, on arrival)¹¹ triggered the identity dissimulation and enabled its operation.

⁹ For more on this ‘ideal-type’, see Kokkali (2010a, pp. 156–158, 303). It is interesting to note that I did not find any correlation of this type with the age of the interviewee nor with length of stay. The main differentiating factor (from the category of immigrants that try to dissociate themselves from ‘the Albanians’) has been the presence or not of family (wife or wife and children) in Greece. Probably the rural origin is also significant, but I haven’t been able to observe a clear correlation, given the limited sample. Actually the tendency of dissociation might have changed as, in the perception of the dominant society, Albanians, from a highly stigmatized group, became highly preferable compared to more recently arrived immigrant groups (Kokkali 2011b).

¹⁰ Another outcome (discussed in the following section) is the internalization of the stigma by Albanians, as in the case of G., who justifies the harsh treatment of Albanian immigrants by the police in the village where he was settled: ‘What do you expect? We were illegal, without documents... The cops were doing their job’. [G. male, Nikomidia, District of Imathia, 13 February 2006].

¹¹ Even if the difference in treatment between Greek-Albanians (*omoyeneis*) and Albanians has become less important over time, actually having no importance at all, Law 1975/1991, which set the premises of the Greek immigration policy, has been highly preferential to individuals of ethnic-Greek origin and for this reason harshly criticized by NGOs and humanitarian organizations. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the impact of this first law in the overall perception of foreign immigrants by the Greek society. Let us recall, however, that the law required that the Ministry of Labour would grant work permits for specific employment, in theory, only before the

Let us recall that already from the 1920s, when Albania was obliged to officially recognize the Greek minority, Greece was trying to increase the minority's size, encompassing all Orthodox Christian populations living close to Greek-speaking villages. Albania, in contrast, adopted the opposite approach, trying to underestimate the minority population (Dodos 1994, pp. 142, n.8).

The attempts of the Greek state to 'inflate' the minority found fertile ground in the thousands of Albanian citizens who wanted to migrate to Greece. In Greek consulates in Albania (in areas close to the Hellenophone villages) an 'identity option' was introduced in relation to migration opportunities: the recognition of 'Greek origin' increased the chances of obtaining entry and work permits for Greece. A prosperous trade thus emerged with Albanian citizens—mostly Christians, but gradually extending to Muslims who managed to become 'Christians' via the falsification of their papers. The 'visa trade' and its clientele network thus expanded far beyond the 'real' minority (Kretsi 2005b, p. 196, 205).

I think that the practice of falsifying one's identity went beyond the falsification of documents. At least during the 1990s and early 2000s, it became very popular among Albanian immigrants to Greece to claim that they were *Vorioepirotas* (literally, Northern Epirots, i.e., members of the Greek minority in Albania), even without having any (false or real) certificate of Greek origin. This practice was then gradually expanded: dissimulating one's identity did not remain a question of claiming to be *Vorioepirotis*. It could also mean introducing oneself with a Greek name, while claiming to be Christian.¹²

This was not without reason. The ethno-cultural perception of the Greek nation has given rise to the creation of 'multiple categories of Greeks' that, in Greek lay discourses, are constructed hierarchically; the category of a person with Greek ethnic origin who was born, raised and resides in Greece and feels Greek is constructed as a central category (Xenitidou 2007).

This multiple categorization entails then who is more or less Greek; the different 'degrees' of Greekness not only reflect the ethos of reception in Greece, but also the governmental policies adopted for each migratory group. As mentioned above, the preference of the state and of the society for the kin groups of foreign citizens

arrival of the foreign employees in Greece and valid for one year (only renewable for another three after which the renewal could only be granted by the Ministry of Public Order). The legislation was less demanding for individuals of Greek descent, who would thus enjoy a favorable legal status, as for instance in employment in which they were preferred to other foreign nationals. The same law comprised preferential provisions on issues of welfare, pension and medical insurance (see Law 1975/1991, Article 24 and also Art. 1, para. 3 and Art. 108 of the Greek Constitution). The advent of the 2001 immigration law put an end—at least on paper—to this preferential treatment.

¹² Very telling of this is the following quote from Veikou (2001, pp. 206): 'Sotiris [...] told me that, when he arrived in Athens for the first time and was looking for a job, many asked him from which part of Albania he was coming from, whether he was Vorioepirotis and whether he was Orthodox Christian. He didn't like to "pass for an Albanian". "I soon understood that who you are in Athens depends on the behaviour. [...] I drive my car and behave as a Greek and the others treat me correctly"'. Similarly, in an empirical study I conducted with Albanian immigrants in 2003 in Thessaloniki, many interviewees admitted that the first question asked of an Albanian by a Greek national concerned his/her religious beliefs.

has been more than obvious. As such, the Pontic Greeks, followed by the Greek-Albanians, were found at the highest level of this imaginary scale. Given that Orthodox Christianity is the official religion in Greece,¹³ it would not be surprising to classify the other Christian Orthodox migrants directly below these two privileged groups,¹⁴ while those who are Muslims would find themselves towards the bottom of the hierarchy (Kokkali 2010, p. 303).

Albanians in particular, given their systematic criminalization, were immediately classified at the very bottom of the social hierarchy in Greece. Without any doubt, this is an additional reason for the expansion of the phenomenon of identity dissimulation or negotiation. The title of De Rapper's (2005) article 'Better than Muslims, not as good as Greeks' is rather eloquent: Albanians—and particularly Muslim Albanians—find it disproportionately difficult to be accepted by local communities. As such, finding a place within the extended boundaries of Greekness is a possible way towards inclusion.

In changing one's name and claiming to be Orthodox Christian—or even claiming Greek origin, even if only as a matter of display—some Albanian immigrants aspired toward and achieved, more or less successfully, wider acceptance within the dominant society, in particular at the local level and as regards personal social bonds with Greek nationals.¹⁵ Besides, given that some degree of 'Greekness' has been thought to make life in Greece easier, the exceptional extension of practices of identity dissimulation is not surprising. Yet, as all 'identity' games are played dialogically (Schippers 1999, p. 21; Taylor 1994, p. 18), this could not have been implemented in such an extensive way if Greek nationals were not willing to participate. The gradual expansion of the boundaries of Greekness, operated by both the society and the state in Greece (and even in Albania), has had a severe impact on the expansion of practices of identity negotiation of Albanians in Greece. As these boundaries were extended, the 'game' was also extended: starting from claiming *Vorioepirotiki* identity, it ended up involving any trait that could imply a degree of Greekness—be it a Greek name, Orthodox Christian faith, and so forth.

Still, not all Albanian immigrants practised this 'identity game'; the characteristics of this differentiation has implications that seem to draw from the migratory project. As discussed previously, disclaiming Greekness has been strongly associated with families as opposed to male Albanian individuals, who were probably engaged in 'circular migration' with Albania, especially in the case of nuclear family

¹³ The role of Orthodoxy is even greater, as being Orthodox Christian is normally a prerequisite for being Greek. For a synthetic discussion of the close connection between Greekness and Orthodoxy and the way in which it has been shaped, see Özkırmı and Sofos (2008, pp. 21–26, 45–46), who also critically review the literature on nationalism in Greece and Turkey in a comparative perspective.

¹⁴ The degree of privileges awarded to the former and the latter was however different. It is because, owing to migration, the Greek minority in Albania was literally 'evacuated'—a result that was not favoured by the Greek diplomatic service. See Pavlou (2003b).

¹⁵ Among our interviewees who have used a Greek name, more than three out of five did so when looking for a job for the first time. In the dissimulation of the Albanian identity, the role of Greek employers and neighbours is very significant, as very often they proposed to christen their Albanian employees and neighbours, thus becoming their godfathers/godmothers.

left behind. This dichotomy is important for identity negotiation. In trying to dissociate oneself from the stigmatized group, expressions such as ‘I am not like the other Albanians’ and ‘I am a family man’ are used. This stresses the difference between the two categories—of which, clearly ‘the other Albanians’, who are not ‘family men’, are more stigmatized than the rest. As in the case of ‘the degrees of Greekness’, this kind of identity negotiation echoes, once again, the differences in the perception—and, in turn, the degrees of acceptance—of the different categories of Albanian immigrants by the dominant society. In the aforementioned imaginary scale, Albanian immigrants with ‘something Greek’ would be ‘better than Muslims, but not as good as Greeks’, and family men would be better than single men.¹⁶

7.3 The ‘Cultural Legacy’

In the previous section, I have tried to elucidate the conditions under which the practices of identity dissimulation and negotiation were generated and the reasons why they were extended. This is only part of the explanation: in the next section, I focus on the Albanian side of the interaction, which implies looking at Albanian history and culture.

7.3.1 *Albania and the Albanians: Negative memories of the homeland, negative perceptions of the national self*

The recent history of Albania has been marked by poverty, while its political and socio-economic situation has been shaped by repetitive crises shaking the country since the fall of the previous regime. Migration became the main livelihood strategy. Migration also meant the discovery of the outside world, given Albania’s total isolation during the 45 years of communist rule. As foreign migrants, Albanians discovered this new world, literally from the bottom, for they almost automatically entered the lowest socio-economic categories of the host societies.

French ethnographer De Rapper (1996) argues that discovering the outside, in the early 1990s, naturally caused a great shock to the Albanian people and the collapse of many identity certainties (see also Lubonja 2002, p. 101; Fuga 2000). He remarks that, beside this discovery, the disorders of the transition period in Albania, with the exponential increase of criminality and amorality,¹⁷ aroused questioning of the character and the ‘nature’ of the Albanians inside the country.

¹⁶ There is nothing new about this in the study of migratory phenomena. French sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad (1999, pp. 112–113) very tellingly described the ‘good immigrants’ for dominant societies, essentially related to ‘our’ family values.

¹⁷ In 1997, a significant bank crisis quickly became political crisis. The collapse of the state has brought the country into chaos, where armed gangs, engaged in various illegal trafficking (drugs,

The following extract (for more, see Kokkali 2011a, pp. 85–114), though referring to ‘distrust’¹⁸ among Albanians, reflects an opinion (shared by many of my interviewees) on the ‘nature’ (the ‘race’), the way of thinking, and the mentality of Albanians.

In general, Albanians help each other but only among relatives; never strangers.... You cannot understand Albanians: now they like each other and then, after two minutes, there is the brawl.... It is like that, by their blood, their race (S., Muslim affiliation, man; interview with his wife, N., Veria, Imathia district, 14 February 2006).

To this perception of the national self are added the hardships of everyday life and the absence of basic individual liberties during Enver Hoxha’s presidency, imprinted in the memories of people as the following extracts evoke (for more, see Kokkali 2010, pp. 199–200):

We do not care about [Albania], nor can we help.... When I left it, I left like a chased wild animal. There is nothing which I care about in this country; I don’t want to hear anything about it.... I don’t think that the situation will ameliorate there; there’s neither water nor public light in the streets. I think that in the future they [the politicians, the State] will rob people even more (L., co-ethnic Greek, man, Thessaloniki, 22 December 2005).
Here’s my home. We are well here, happy.... When I go back there, I see that they are all [the family, in particular her parents] doing fine and this is enough for me.... I don’t want to return. Because in Albania it has been very hard for us; I wasn’t able to buy a banana... a sweet for my children (D., woman, Thessaloniki, 17 December 2005).

Depicting Albania and the Albanians as such is in sharp contrast with the regime’s propaganda about the superiority of the Albanian people and the claim that Albania was the happiest country in the world. The identity uncertainties that this contrast seems to have generated are persuasively described by Albanian journalist Fatos Lubonja (2002, p. 96, 101–103):

Albanians continue to live divided between the glory of their virtual world and the misery of their real world. One of the most eloquent expressions of that separation is the paradox in which on the one hand Albanians express their pride in being Albanians, considering themselves to be natural superiors while on the other hand, they regularly defame their country and try to escape from it in search of a better life.

This duality—the pride of being Albanian while escaping Albania (and dissimulating identity in Greece under an adopted name)—becomes clear from the last interviewee quoted above, who also remarked, ‘I am proud of being Albanian. I have never hidden the fact that I come from Albania.... Some people know me as A. [Greek name] and some as D. [original name]’.

This, however, should be considered together with the ‘external’ world context. Beside the negative memories of, and the simultaneous unrest in, Albania (with the consequent identity questionings that this may have aroused), the concurrent transmission of a representation of Albanians as bandits and barbarians by the Greek, Italian, and other European media resulted in this image of a ‘nation of thieves and

weapons and human beings that might also have been relatives of the traffickers), had taken the full control of some towns and villages. Albanians often refer to this period as a ‘civil war’ or ‘when we took the guns’.

¹⁸ For this issue, see Kokkali (2011b).

robbers' ending up by finding a particular echo even within Albania (De Rapper 1996). The image of Albanians constructed by the rest of the world and mirrored back to them, yet marked by prejudice, has undoubtedly had a decisive influence on the perception of the self within the country and in a migratory context.

Internalizing the stigma has thus been a result of a twofold situation related both to the source and the settlement country. The latter's role is quite obvious and has been discussed in the previous section. The source country is linked to this process via the people's memories of a harsh life depicted by deprivation, the regime's deception about the state of the outside world compared to Albania, and the discovery of this world with its negative perception of Albanians and Albania during the country's chaotic situation in the 1990s. All are factors that seem to have given rise to identity uncertainties for Albanian migrants and non-migrants, and, in turn, to identity negotiations in the country of settlement.

In his study on the management of stigma, Goffman (1963, p. 31, 152) stresses techniques—such as 'passing' and 'covering'—by which the stigmatized individual tries to dissimulate his or her stigma. The intention behind such devices (which include practices like name-changing) is mainly to restrict the way in which a known attribute obtrudes itself into the centre of attention—because, 'obtrusiveness increases the difficulty of maintaining easeful inattention regarding the stigma' (ibid.: 127). In this sense, 'covering' the Albanian origin and trying to 'pass' as Orthodox Christian and/or Greek-Albanian or somebody coming from Tirana or Korçe is a strategy that seeks to advocate comforting—for the local society—inattention to the stigmatized origin.

Overall, managing the stigmatized identity one way or another is a strategy of adaptation of the Albanian individual to a double situation: non-acceptance and stigmatization in Greece, as well as uncertainty regarding Albania and the Albanians.

7.3.2 *Legacies of the Past and 'Flexible Religious Practices'*

The legacy of atheism imposed by Hoxha could probably explain the apparently 'low religiosity' of Albanians; this, in turn, could justify the ease with which at a minimum a superficial religious shift (i.e., pretending to be Orthodox Christian) was carried out in Greece.

In 1967, in Albania, there was official abolition of all religious activities, even in the private sphere. Harsh persecution of religious practices and the closing down or destruction of many places of worship also took place. The regime's nationalist propaganda promoted elimination of the divisions of the past—namely, the split among four different faiths (Orthodox and Catholic Christians, Sunni and Bekhtashi Muslims), for the sake of the nation's unity.¹⁹

¹⁹ This was not an 'invention' of the regime; it has only been a different version of what Albanian nationalism (since its birth) was anyway based on: the idea that the religion of Albanians is

However, for several reasons, the regime did not erase the primordial community identities, such as family, regional, or religious. For example, mixed marriages remained rather rare, except among the urban elite (Clayer 2003). This is probably because, for Albanians, to be Christian or Muslim is very important in the construction of the self. While the nationalist rhetoric (relaunched during the communist regime in a slightly different version) insisted that one is Albanian before being Christian or Muslim, it seems that—at least locally—one should be Christian or Muslim in order to be Albanian (De Rapper 2002b).

This brings into light the complexity of the issue of religiosity in Albania, which comes in stark opposition to a widely diffused view on the religious indifference of Albanians (Malcolm 2002, p. 84); for many researchers, this would explain the ‘facility’ with which Albanians practise a religious shift in Greece. Instead of religious indifference, I would rather refer to ‘flexible religious practices’ among Albanians that seem to be related to two different facts.

First, according to ethnographer De Rapper (2002a) and historian Clayer (2007), for Albanians, the religious affiliation is more a form of social organisation, collective involvement and recognition of a common origin than religious belief alone. The community identification based on religion persists today, even though it is less assertive in religious practice than in the conscience of belonging to a distinct group (Clayer 2007; De Rapper 2002a).

One is Muslim or Christian by following the patrilineal religious affiliation. This means belonging to a cultural community, but also to a quasi-biological one, given that specific kinship groups are involved in this belonging. In that sense, nominally adopting a faith that is different from the original religious community could not affect the quasi-genealogical relation to this latter. As such, the massive phenomena of religious ‘shift’ in Greece (either only outwardly or involving conversion and christening as well) could be elucidated by the fact that assuming a different religion is superficial, since one would remain anyway what one is originally ‘by birth’, through one’s familial affiliation.²⁰

Since the restoration of religious freedom in 1990, the new religious scene that emerged has added more complexity to the issue. Religion in Albania appears now to be both marginal and central, argues Clayer (2003). It is marginal because, as in other former communist countries, the secularization of the society is very pronounced, since the elite was trained in the ‘Marxist school’ and the younger

‘Albanianism’. Religion formed a dividing factor for the Albanian population and thus it would not be included in the construction of the nation (Clayer 2007).

²⁰ In conducting ethnographic research in South-East Albania (Devoll), De Rapper (2002a) argues indeed that a person cannot flee the belonging represented by his/her religious affiliation, even if s/he was converted to another religion. Religion is intrinsic to origin and birth, and therefore displaying a different religion is a merely superficial act that could not alter the person’s ‘nature’, i.e. the affiliation attributed by birth. The author stresses, besides, that even when the level of religious practice is low, people are aware of their religious affiliation and origin. Even during the communist era, when—theoretically—no Christians or Muslims existed, religious affiliation was still mentioned (even in official documents) and expressed in forms such as ‘family of Christian origin’.

generations have grown up in an atheist environment. Religious practice continues to be rather limited, although places of worship have blossomed again all over the country (ibid.).²¹

Still, in some respects, religion is central. As mentioned above, collective identities based on religion have remained strong. Clayer (ibid.) stresses that the society is partly structured according to denominational affiliations: everybody knows the religious origin of everybody. As a result, religion seems to appear in the behaviour of individuals and, more importantly, in socio-political developments.²²

Overall, there is a whole constellation of different meanings, perceptions and attitudes towards religion in Albania. Conversions to Christianity are often a means to express an adhesion to the Western world. Clayer (ibid.) argues that Catholicism, although of limited importance regarding religious and political life in Albania, enjoys great prestige in the sphere of culture and in the process of identity construction. The Catholic community is often presented as the main force in the historical development of Albanian nationalism, even if this does not really coincide with reality. Still, this perception is adopted even by non-Catholics, and it seems to form a way for the Albanian nation to acquire a more 'European' dimension. Christianity understood as Catholicism is promoted by an intellectual trend that rejects Islam, while presenting Catholicism both as the original religion of the Albanians and as the only religion and culture that would allow Albania's integration into Europe.²³ Albanian writer Ismail Kadare is part of this trend, despite his Muslim origin. He wrote in the early 1990s:

I was convinced that Albania would lean towards the Christians' religion, because it was linked with the culture, with the memory and with the nostalgia of the period before the Turks. ... The Albanian nation would proceed to this great historical rectification, what would hasten its union with the mother continent: Europe (Kadare 1991, pp. 50–51, quoted in Clayer 2003).

²¹ According to a survey conducted by the University of Tirana, in 1999 (quoted by Clayer 2003), 33% of the sample very rarely visits a place of worship, 30,5% at least once a year, 23,9% at least once a month, 9% once a week, and 3,1% more than once a week. Yet, as a value, religion seems to be important for the Albanians, while the proportion of atheists is trivial. For more than 70% of the sample, religion is very important or quite important and, from those, 90% believe in God. Another survey shows that, among peasants, religion is considered to be the most important value after family, work, friends, and before leisure and politics (Fuga 2000, pp. 210–211).

²² As a collective belonging, religion is often used in the political field, through relationships or discourses. The political changes have shown that the rightwing circles generally instrumentalize Islam (without considering Bektashism separately), while the leftwing ones use Orthodoxy to a greater extent and are in favour of the promotion of Bektashism as the basis of a separate community, as well as a form of nationalism. Catholic circles are closer to rightwing milieus, but they can be instrumentalized by more important groups in their relationship with the West. This does not mean that religious communities are politically homogeneous; besides, often, these instrumentalizations are parallel to uses of regional belonging (small regions against small regions, or North against South) (Clayer 2003).

²³ Some of my interviewees of Muslim affiliation referred indeed to the idea that 'originally Albanians were Christians'.

In light of these trends, the conversions and shifts (or pseudo-shifts) of religion in Greece (but also in Italy) are better understood. In order to explain them further, we should also consider the frequent declarations of Albanians in Albania or in Greece on ‘the uniqueness of God’. One of my respondents in Thessaloniki in 2005 declared, ‘I am a Muslim, but I go to church.... God is one and only’.²⁴ Kretsi (2005a) reported similar declarations. One of her interviewees in Albania remarked, ‘We’re going to church regularly.... There is only one Lord. Regardless of religion.’ Both these statements on the uniqueness of God and the needlessness of distinguishing between churches and mosques seem to underline a perception of God and religion among Albanians that appears to permit a ‘flexible religious practice’. As Kretsi (2005a) points out, this attitude towards the divine that transcends sectarian divisions and appears strange to ‘foreign’ eyes, seems to facilitate Albanians’ adoption of the Christian religion in Greece (and Italy). When studying this phenomenon and the Albanians’ ‘flexible religious practices’, it seems useful to look at the religious syncretism widely spread in the Ottoman Balkans—in particular among Albanophone populations.

Ethno-religious border-crossing and syncretism has been widespread. Sharing of sacred sites, worshipping the same saints, exchanging amulets, and even sharing ritual practices was indeed common during the Ottoman period and even afterwards (Hasluck 1973/ 1929, pp. 31–36, 68–69).

In studying an Ottoman Balkan city, in his book on Salonica, Mazower (2004, p. 68) observes that even when confessional boundaries were not crossed, the daily life of the city fostered a considerable sharing of beliefs and practices. He stresses that there was far less theological policing under the Ottomans than there was in Christendom at the same time. This laxity and the absence of heresy hunters enabled the emergence of a popular religious culture that united the city’s diverse faiths around a common sense of the sacred and divine.

In the Albanophone Balkans, more particularly, there are numerous examples in Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia, where Muslim and Christian forms of pilgrimage and saint veneration have amalgamated, while formal religious divisions have become blurred (Duijzings 2000, p. 2). In his book on Kosovo (1998, pp. 129–130), Noel Malcolm, too, observes that syncretism of rituals and folk beliefs were shared among Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims. He remarks, besides, that with so many practices either shared or replicated between faiths, ‘these people probably did not notice such a dramatic difference in kind between all forms of Christianity on the one hand and Islam on the other’.

This idea of amalgamating religious practices, thus blurring the boundaries of faith, seems rather akin to the reference that Skendi (1967, p. 227) makes on ‘double faith’ in the Balkans.²⁵ He stresses that it is not always easy to distinguish between double faith (having two religions) and the phenomenon of Crypto-Christianity

²⁴ Interview on 20 December 2005, in Thessaloniki. See also Clayer (2003).

²⁵ Mazower (2000, pp. 65–66), besides, notices that the blurring of the divide between the three great monotheistic faiths was a feature of one of the fastest-growing religious movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Balkans—the strain of Islamic mysticism known as

(publicly professing Islam, while practising Christianity in private). Besides, he adds, it is also difficult to distinguish between Crypto-Christianity and pure prejudice. As Malcolm (1998, p. 129) too remarks, the main function of religion for ordinary people in this kind of society was quasi-magical—a set of practices for warding off evil, curing illness or ensuring a good harvest. As such, in areas where different religions intermingled, people would make use of all available forms of magically efficacious protection.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore if Balkan populations during the Ottoman rule practised a ‘double faith’, conversion, or Crypto-Christianism or whether their practices were more led by prejudice than by anything else; more importantly, it goes beyond our objective here to address the question of whether Albanian populations adopted such practices more (or less) than other Balkan peoples. Yet, it appears to me that there is a close connection of those practices and the aforementioned idea on the ‘uniqueness of God’. It is not a coincidence therefore that a Franciscan report of seventeenth century Kosovo makes a reference to this: ‘Those impious people [Muslim proselytisers] also said that the difference between them and the Christians was small; “After all”, they said, “we all have the same God, we venerate your Christ as a prophet and holy man, we celebrate many of the festivals of your saints with you, and you celebrate Friday, our festive day; Mohammed and Christ are brothers”... And this error was so widespread, that in the same family one person would be Catholic, one Muslim and one Orthodox’. (quoted in Malcolm 1998:133–134)

Regarding the practices of the Albanian immigrants in Greece, Kretsi (2005a) remarks that many of her respondents considered baptism solely as a public act: ‘I remain, however, Muslim’, claimed one of her informants, whereas another one was ready to baptize if his employer asked him: ‘like that, for friendship, for *gief* [pleasure], not by obligation, since I have anyway another religion’. As Kretsi observes, with these perceptions, Muslim faith and Christian baptism are absolutely compatible—exactly as in the aforementioned attitudes towards faith and religious practice met largely in the Ottoman Albanophone Balkans, I would add. Similar to contemporary practices, transcending the boundaries of faith or even adopting a faith of façade at the time was largely accompanied by the practice of also adopting another name.²⁶

Bektashism. Bektashism spread throughout southeastern Europe and became popular in much of southern Albania. For the role of Bektashism in Albania, see Clayer (1995).

²⁶ Circa 1650, a Catholic missionary in Prizren reported that some of the many converts to Islam were claiming that ‘in our hearts we are Christians; we have only changed our names [adopted Moslem names] in order not to pay taxes imposed by the Turks’ (quoted in Skendi 1967, p. 228). Crypto-Christianity in the Balkans can find an equivalent to the Marranos in Spain (op. cit.: 227). Referring to the Marranos, converted to Catholicism already many generations before leaving Portugal to come to Ottoman Salonica, Mazower (2004, p. 69) reports that they were baptized and went to church, but would be Jews ‘inside’: ‘Some of them [...] had kept Jewish customs alive secretly for decades, and equipped their children with two names [“If I ask one of their children: ‘What’s your name?’” reported one observer, ‘they will respond: ‘At home they call me Abraham and in the street Francesco”]’.

This incomplete reminder of religious practice in the Ottoman Balkans permits us to explore some analogies between ‘now’ and ‘then’ and therefore shed light on the ‘cultural factor’—related more to the source country and its history, rather than the circumstances in the destination country (i.e., the ‘structural factors’, see Vermeulen 2001). In doing this, I hope to have made a small contribution to the renewal of the scientific debate around the Albanian immigrants’ identity negotiation/dissimulation in Greece that tends to underestimate the legacies of the past.

7.4 Conclusion

Albanian migration to Greece deserves closer attention, because it forms the most important intra-Balkan population movement post-1990, while it deviates in some crucial respects from more common patterns of settlement and adaptation of immigrants in new homelands. There is no ‘natural’ response to a hostile ethos of reception, such as that experienced until the mid-2000s by Albanian immigrants in Greece. The ‘Albanian way’, as described in this chapter, is an option among others; it is diametrically opposite to the reaction of withdrawing into one’s own group and emphasizing the difference with the dominant society, as suggested by the theory of ‘reactive ethnicity’ (see Portes & Rumbaut 2001, pp. 148–152). Albanian immigrants, at least the first-generation immigrants studied here, opted for name-changing and religious shifts, trying to stress their similarities with Greeks. But, because this possibility was one among many, the hostile social climate in Greece on its own is unable to explain this choice of strategy. For this purpose, apart from the ‘structural factor’ that impacts on immigrants’ social mobility in host societies, I have also sought to look at cultural factors that may influence this mobility and overall the integration of immigrants (Vermeulen 2001). In so doing, I have examined more closely the history of the source country before the emigration episode. This has helped me to understand how history and culture may affect the newcomers’ attitudes, practices, behaviours, and, in turn, their strategies of adaptation in the country of settlement.

Indeed, the study of the more—and the less—distant past shows that name-changing and religious shift are not novelties in Albanian history. All immigrants reconstruct their identities in the host countries. Not all of them, however, opt for identity dissimulation *en masse* as with the case of Albanians in Greece. Even if activated by the circumstances encountered in this country—namely, a hostile reception and the existence of a Greek minority in Southern Albania—neither the name-changing nor the religious shift seem to be unknown practices for Albanian populations. Rather, they represent strategies employed in similar modes at many times in the past, particularly in the long Ottoman history.

Nonetheless, the more recent history of the country, namely the autocratic regime of Hoxha, also left its mark on people’s behaviour. The fall of the regime left the Albanians exposed to a severe identity crisis, seeking to understand whether the stereotypical image of them conveyed by the ‘West’ was true or not. In the

light of this crisis, and—needless to repeat—stigmatization by the host societies, the des-identification, that is, the effort to differentiate oneself from the rest of the (stigmatized) group, has been a highly practised option at least among immigrants in Greece.

The absence of any physiognomic markers that would render their difference from the dominant society visible, together with their identity management, seems to have suggested the ‘social inconspicuousness’ of the Albanian immigrants in Greece. Probably every Greek sought to distinguish her or his Albanian neighbours; but, outside this local scale of personal relations and close vicinity, the Albanians were collectively visible in very few cases. For Thessaloniki, the field of my study, the Albanians were distinctively perceptible as a different group only in the *piazzas* for job-seeking. Compared to their numeric weight in the city’s population, however, this visibility can be considered negligible.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter, the Albanians’ ‘social inconspicuousness’ is reflected in the way in which their physical setting is contained within the Greek city. The remarkable absence of ethnic infrastructure and the dispersion of Albanian households throughout the city suggest the ‘spatial invisibility’ of the most important immigrant population of Thessaloniki. As maintained in this chapter, despite their great numbers, Albanians do not reveal any visible trace of their ethnicity in the urban space. As such, apart from being socially inconspicuous, Albanians are also spatially ‘invisible’.

It is important to note, however, that both outside forces and the preferences of the migrant group may lead to residential dispersion. This latter is not a sign of weakening of the group’s identity. Besides, it would be wrong to interpret the counter-practice of clustering as a refusal to integrate, while understanding the residential dispersion as an enthusiastic volition to inclusion. In its way, each option expresses a form of response appropriate to the circumstances created by the migration situation and from the specific resources available to each group of migrants in order to deal with the situation (Barou 2003, p. 263).

In this respect, Albanian migrants’ relative invisibility in Greece, and more particularly in Thessaloniki, reflects a specific adaptation strategy among other options—a strategy which is not, anyway, an option for *all* Albanians in Greece. Moreover, apart from representing the Albanian immigrants’ adaptation to the conditions encountered in Greece, these strategies respond too to the process of adaptation of Albanians to the post-communist era—meaning the realities that emerged after the discovery of the outside world, namely Albania’s position in this latter and the questionings that have arisen on what it may mean to be Albanian. These strategies also make use of the cultural legacies of a more distant past. As such, I argue that the practices of inconspicuousness respond to a complex situation that draws on both the Greek context of reception and the Albanian background.

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Ifigeneia Kokkali is a research fellow at the Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture & Planning. Since 2009 she has been an adjunct professor at the Institut Français d'Urbanisme, Université Paris-Est. Previously she has worked at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece and the European University Institute, Italy. Her research interests revolve around migration and the city, ethno-cultural diversity of urban populations and segregation. A recent publication on these topics is 'Absence of a "community" and spatial invisibility: Migrants from Albania in Greece and the case of Thessaloniki', in F. Eckardt and J. Eade (eds.) *Ethnically diverse city*, Future Urban Research in Europe 4, Berlin: Berliner-Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2011. Website: <http://www.eui.eu/Projects/ACCEPT/Consortium/People/IfigeneiaKokkali.aspx>.