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BETTER THAN MUSLIMS, NOT AS GOOD AS GREEKS  
Emigration as experienced and imagined by the Albanian Christians of Lunxhëri

*Gilles de Rapper*

My first encounter with Albanian emigration happened in 1995-96, when I was doing fieldwork in the border district of Devoll, in south-eastern Albania. I was staying in an Albanian-speaking Christian village, up in the mountains and close to the Greek border. Villagers told me about people from the closest Muslim village, down in the valley: ‘Look at them, down there. At the time of the cooperative, they used to insult us by calling us “damned Greeks”, “bloody Greeks”. But today they all work in Greece and have Greek names, while we did not go to Greece. Who is Greek then?’ As a matter of fact, people from the Christian villages – who insist on their Albanian national identity and refuse to be called Greek – have been moving to the town and even more to the United States, where they retain links dating back to the time of the pre-World War II migration known as *keurbet*. Meanwhile, their Muslim neighbours started in the early 1990s to migrate to Greece, where most of them changed their names and some converted to Orthodoxy.

Emigration appeared to be a matter of negotiation of identity not only for those who were living in the host society, but also for the ones living at home, giving new forms to boundaries inside local society. In this chapter, I look at the impact of migration on the construction of collective identity in a more complex local society. If the district of Devoll is clearly divided between a Muslim majority and a few Christian villages higher up in the mountains, the district of Gjirokastër, on which this paper focuses, is divided into several intermingled groups, based on religion, territory, language and national identity. Each of these groups seems to have its [174] specific migration strategy, using different networks. I focus here on the sense of belonging and identity of the people involved in the migration, i.e. the migrants and their families, either in Albania or in Greece.

My main fieldwork location is the group of around a dozen villages named Lunxhëri, on the slopes of the mountain range facing the town of Gjirokastër.<sup>1</sup> See Figures 1 and 2 for location maps, first of Southern Albania, and second of the area of Lunxhëri. Until the 1960s, Lunxhëri was mainly inhabited by Albanian-speaking Orthodox Christians called the Lunxhots. By then, and starting during and just after the Second World War, many of them had left their villages to settle in Gjirokastër and in the towns of central Albania, where living conditions and employment opportunities were considered better. They were replaced, from the end of the 1950s on, by Vlachs, forced by the regime to settle in agricultural cooperatives. Some Muslim families from Kurvelesh, in the mountainous area of Labëria, also came to Lunxhëri at the same time – in fact, many of them were employed as shepherds in the villages of Lunxhëri even before the [175] Second World War. While Lunxhëri practiced (as did many other regions) a high level of (territorial) endogamy, marriage alliances started to occur between Christians Lunxhots and members of the Greek minority of the districts of Gjirokastër (Dropull, Pogon) and Sarandë. Such alliances were both encouraged by the regime and used by people to facilitate internal mobility and obtain a better status and life-chances.

Today, the population of Lunxhëri is perceived as composed of three main groups:

- the Lunxhots, who call themselves ‘ethnic Lunxhots’ or ‘*autoktonë*’, and are called ‘villagers’ (*fishatarë*) by the others;
- the Vlachs<sup>2</sup>, who call themselves ‘*çoban*’ or ‘Greek-Vlachs’ and are still referred to by the Lunxhots as ‘newcomers’ (*të ardhur*);
- [176] and finally the Muslims, whether they trace their origin in Labëri or claim to be autochthonous (as is the case for instance in the village of Erind). They refer to themselves as Muslims or Turks (*myslyman, turk*).

The various terms used in this categorisation will be discussed further below.

Its complex ethnic composition and social history make Lunxhëri an interesting case in the study of border communities. This chapter is part of a study of the Greek-Albanian border in Epirus, from its creation in 1913 to present time, which I started in 2001. I made short stays (up to ten days) in every village of Lunxhëri, as well as in Gjirokastër and Greek villages of Pogon (both in Greece and Albania), and in Tirana, where lots of Lunxhots have migrated. The material presented here has been collected through interviews with Lunxhotes living in Lunxhëri, in Tirana or in Greece, and consists in large part of family histories and genealogies. This enables me to focus on three main topics regarding the impact of the international border on Lunxhëri:

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in Lunxhëri and other locations in southern Albania in 2001 and 2002, sometimes in collaboration with Pierre Sintès of the *Ecole Française* in Athens. My research has been mainly funded by the French CNRS, through the project *La question d’Epire: intégration et développement de la région frontalière gréco-albanaise*.

<sup>2</sup> On the Vlachs in southern Albania, see Kahl (1999), especially Map 6.

- the transformation of migration patterns, both internal and external, following the changing status of the international border (from openness during the interwar period to closure during the communist regime and openness again after 1991);
- the marriage alliance patterns, especially intermarriage between Christians and Muslims, and between Albanian-speakers and Greek-speakers;
- the fluid ethnic boundaries between the different groups inhabiting the area.

As usual for a male anthropologist in Albania, most of the people I interviewed are men. By spending my time in families, however, I managed to conduct some interviews with women, or at least to witness, during general conversations, where men and women disagreed.

### **The impact of migration on the construction of identity**

It is common-sense to say that the politics of immigration and the reception of migrants by the host society have an impact on the migrants' individual strategies – such as in the case of changing one's personal name. It is also acknowledged that emigration has an impact on the economy of the country of origin, mainly through remittances. This chapter aims to illustrate that the impact of migration goes beyond remittances and personal strategies, and affects also the construction of collective (and individual) identity in the society of origin: that is to say that the [177] people who do not leave, or who do not directly benefit from remittances, are also affected by migration in the way they perceive themselves.

In that sense, emigration to Greece has rendered more visible some distinctions and lines of division of local Albanian society, for instance between *minoritarië*, or members of the Greek minority in Albania, and Albanians; or between Orthodox Christians and Muslims. New categories have also emerged – such as 'Northern Epirotes'<sup>3</sup> – which have become central in the way migrants themselves perceive their migratory experience, and which influence some of their decisions. In other words, every migrant, before leaving Albania, is confronted by these oppositions and categories, when he or she has to think about the means of departure: legally, if documents can be easily obtained; or illegally, if the individual believes on the contrary that his/her religious affiliation, first name, or place of origin, will make it difficult to obtain the documents. Those categories and lines of division were certainly not unknown in the original society, but some of them had been denied by the communist regime (the case of religious affiliation – although it was still relevant in social relations) or were not openly mentioned (as in the case of national or linguistic minorities).

The notion of *kurbet*, already mentioned above, is a good example of how past and present migration to a foreign land, both as facts and as representations, shape the social

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<sup>3</sup> This is a new category, as it could not be used during the communist period.

relations inside local society.<sup>4</sup> It is striking for instance how, of the three groups under consideration here, only the Lunxhots claim – and to a certain extent are acknowledged to have – an exclusive connection with the *kurbet*. Lots of aspects of social life are said to have been inherited from the *kurbet*. For instance, the Lunxhot female traditional costume, which acts as a marker of Lunxhot identity vis-à-vis the Vlachs, Greeks and Muslims, is said to reflect the prosperity of Lunxhot migrants in Istanbul and to be influenced by models originating from the capital city of the empire.<sup>5</sup> The ritual of hospitality, pieces of furniture and varieties of trees cultivated in the courtyards and gardens are also said to have been brought in by Lunxhot *kurbetllinj* (returnees). Altogether, and most important, the Lunxhots claim a higher level of ‘culture’ than all other areas of Southern Albania, because of their old practice of *kurbet*. The time of the *kurbet* is thus generally presented as a golden age for Lunxhëri, a time when the villages enjoyed prosperity, development, and when the Lunxhots formed a kind of *aristokraci* in the whole area. Needless to say, this idealised memory of the *kurbet* stands in sharp opposition to the actual migration to Greece that Lunxhëri has experienced from 1991 on. As we shall see, present migration to Greece is said to bring no good at all to Lunxhëri, and to mean on the contrary the end of everything (people are leaving, shops are closed, fields and gardens abandoned, etc.).

It is also necessary to note that the idealisation of the *kurbet* – which opposes *kurbet* to present migration as if communism had no impact at all on the villages – is mainly a characteristic of men’s discourse on local [178] society. During one evening conversation with a couple of neighbours in the village of Këllëz, one of the men started to tell me about the *kurbet* which ‘opened us to the world, brought us culture’. He was immediately interrupted by one of the women who told him: ‘What are you saying? When we went for the first time to Greece [after 1991], we did not even know how to flush the toilet, nor to use knives and forks!’ Thus the glorification of the *kurbet* on the part of men whose sons are now working in Greece should not be taken as a general feature of Lunxhot identity, although it plays a role in the way the Lunxhots define themselves and in the way they consider today’s migration to Greece.

The opening of the border to Greece and new opportunities of migration have not had the same impact on the different categories of population. The Vlachs seem to have been the first to depart on a large scale from the villages and go to Greece. This is a result of their bad condition in Lunxhëri, where they were still considered foreigners and had suffered more than the others from persecution during communism. Their migration also drew on their connections with kin living in Greece, as all of them trace their origin to the village of Kefalovrisso (the old Mexhide), in Greek Epirus Sintès 2003. As they were the first ones to leave, they were also the first ones to come back, starting in 1993-94. Some of them came back to the ‘home’ village, where they opened a small shop – most of the times the only one existing in the village – and/or bought a minibus to transport goods and

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<sup>4</sup> Deriving from the Turkish *gurbet*, meaning ‘exile in a distant land’, *kurbet* was the term habitually used to denote early migration from Albania (see Papaïlias 2003). Like many inhabitants of Epirus and Macedonia, male Lunxhotes used to migrate to Istanbul, Izmir and, later on, to Greece and the United States.

<sup>5</sup> Another hypothesis maintains that the costume is of direct Illyrian origin, deriving from the original inhabitants of Albania.

travellers between the village and the town of Gjirokastër. In several villages, such as Saraqinishtë, this economic power, added to their demographic weight, allowed them to gain some political power by being elected as village heads (*krjetar i fshatit*). Others continued to work as masons or carpenters, as they did in Greece, working either in the villages or in Gjirokastër. Some of them actually left the village to settle in Gjirokastër where the labour market offers more opportunities. More recently, they were also the first ones to use the lands they possess to grow grapes and vegetables on a commercial scale rather than for domestic use only, as is usual among other villagers. Altogether, they became prominent in the villages; their success is a source of envy and jealousy for the other villagers.

The two other groups, the Lunxhots and the Muslims, soon followed the example of the Vlachs. In their accounts of their first experience in Greece, they often refer to the Vlachs as guides and well-connected people from whom they could expect assistance in Greece. Actually, there is evidence that Vlachs – as well as Lab shepherds from Lazarat – already played that role before the opening of the border, when they were supposed to know hidden tracks across the border that even the border guards were not aware of. A young male informant from Këllëz, thus used the ‘Vlach network’ through Sopik (Albanian Pogon) and Kefalovrisso/Mexhide (Greek Pogon) to go to Veria in 1991, before moving on to Athens three months later to look for a distant cousin. Just as the Vlachs present [179] themselves as ‘Greek-Vlachs’, most of the Lunxhots and, although with less ease, the Muslims who migrate to Greece pretend to be Greeks, or of Greek origin, or at least Christians. It is interesting to note however that, due to the very limited number of intermarriages with Vlachs and to the generally bad reputation the Vlachs have in the area, the Lunxhots do not claim a Greek identity through an invented Vlach identity, but rather directly, through intermarriage with the Greek minority members in Dropull, Pogon and Sarandë.

### **Local society and its lines of division**

Southern Albania forms a particularly complex society as far as collective identity is concerned. At first sight, it can be described as a juxtaposition of small units identified by specific ethnonyms and/or toponyms. Although they are usually not administrative units, most of them are known and recognised by the whole population and even by the State, for instance through official ethnography. Lunxhëri is thus an ‘ethnographic region’ (*krabinë etnografike*) surrounded by others, namely Zagori, Pogon, Dropull and Kurvelesh, and a part of the larger ethno-linguistic unit called Labëri Zojzi 1962.<sup>6</sup> These units are also characterised by a high level of endogamy, which is a good illustration of their relevance for local populations. It is usual for its inhabitants to define Lunxhëri as an endogamous unit. As often happens, endogamy is more ideal than real, as people are actually marrying in and out. Even though, things are seen as following a specific pattern: girls from Lunxhëri should not be married out, except if they have a physical handicap or a low morality. Men

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<sup>6</sup> Its population, however, is said to be ‘non-Lab’, the Labs inhabiting the area ‘between the three bridges of Drashovicë, Tepelenë and Kalasë’ (Zojzi 1962).

are marrying in, in contradiction to the patri-virilocal rule of residence, but this is explained – at least in local discourse – by the situation of Lunxhëri in the context of the *kurbet*: men being abroad for long periods of time, it was not easy to find a husband inside Lunxhëri, and men from outside were looking for these unions, as it allowed them to enter the prosperous and prestigious villages of Lunxhëri.

A closer examination reveals, however, a much more complex and dynamic situation: most of these small units have porous and changing borders (as can be expected in the case of ethnically-based groups), and the meaning they have for their members, as well as for outsiders, is also changing according to time and circumstances. The question of the boundaries of Lunxhëri is thus a matter of discussion among educated Lunxhots as well as among ethnographers. First comes a group of seven villages whose inclusion into Lunxhëri cannot be disputed: Nokovë, Mingull, Këllëz, Dhoksat, Qestorat, Saraqinishtë and Stegopull form the ‘heart’ of Lunxhëri and are considered the most ancient and aristocratic villages. Two other villages, Erind to the north and Selckë to the south, are usually added to this core. Then comes a group of villages which are [180] generally lower in altitude and share the fact of having been parts of *çiflik* or land estates owned by Muslims before World War Two, whereas Lunxhëri is proud of its history of ‘independence’ and exclusive Orthodox Christian character. Those villages are called by others ‘below’ (*poshtë*) and their inhabitants are *poshtarak*, ‘lowlanders’, with a rather strong derogatory meaning: they live lower down, closer to the river, and are also seen as of low morality and culture, partly because of their mixed origin (people working on the *çiflik* lands came from different parts of the country), partly because they did not experience the *kurbet*.<sup>7</sup> Finally, one is told about ‘geographic Lunxhëri’ (as opposed to ‘ethnographic Lunxhëri’), a kind of larger Lunxhëri that includes also the area known as Odrie to the north and the village of Labovë e Kryqit to the south. People from Odrie, for instance, issued tapes of traditional music under the name of ‘Grupi i Lunxhërisë’. On the part of ‘ethnographic Lunxhëri’, the extension beyond the ‘ethnic border’ has the advantage of bringing into Lunxhëri the historically and architecturally valuable villages of Labovë e Kryqit (with its twelfth-century Byzantine church) and Labovë e Zhapës (home of the successful nineteenth-century *kurbetilli* Vangjel Zhapa and of several patriots from the Meksi family). As can be seen from the presentation of the different geographic meanings of Lunxhëri, there are both a stress on local identity (and this is not specific to Lunxhëri) and a wide spectrum of ways to understand the content and meaning of this local identity.

Two main lines of division seem significant in the case of Lunxhëri and determine most of the process of construction of ethnic boundaries. The first one is religion, the second ethno-national belonging. As in other parts of Albania de Rapper 2002, and notwithstanding official ideology on the lack of relevance of religious affiliation, local society is strongly organised in terms of religious communities, or *fe*: Lunxhot identity, as it is expressed today, relies on the belonging to Orthodox Christianity. The Lunxhots are proud of being Christians, proud of the numerous and sometimes historically and

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<sup>7</sup> For sure, this sharp opposition between low and high villages vanishes when one looks at the family histories: individuals and families have always been moving from one side to the other, through marriage or work opportunities.

architecturally valuable churches and monasteries that are spread all over Lunxhëri. Religious festivals such as Shën Sotir, celebrated on 6 August at Drenovë monastery in Mingull, are supposed to gather most of the population,<sup>8</sup> and Christian holidays structure the whole year. This is important as more and more migrants follow the rhythm of Greek Orthodox year, with breaks for Christmas, Easter and mid-August, instead of the two-season cycle that first characterised Albanian emigration to Greece, when migrants left their homes from April to October. As a matter of fact, the revival of Christian holidays in Lunxhëri may be seen, at least partially, as a consequence of migration to Greece, after several decades of proscribed religious practice. The ban on religious personal names during communism did not affect them too much (Lunxhots appear to have been on the right side at that time, many of them becoming army officers, high-ranked officials, etc.) and they almost all bear Christian names. Those who did not get baptised in the 1990s, either in Albania or [181] in Greece, and others got religiously married many years after their civil marriage.

By insisting on their religious affiliation, and especially in front of a French and allegedly Christian anthropologist, the Lunxhots are opposing themselves to the other main religious community in the area, the Muslims.<sup>9</sup> This opposition is expressed at different levels. It is first directed against the Muslim Lunxhots, most of whom are considered as foreigners (*të ardhur*), as they moved from Labëri (Kurvelesh) to Lunxhëri before and after the Second World War. The sense of otherness is not only due to their origin outside Lunxhëri, but mainly to the fact that they are Muslims (Christians moved from other places to Lunxhëri at the same time, but their origin is generally forgotten today, or not considered relevant). The Muslims from Erind – the only village in Lunxhëri to be Muslim in majority – are not perceived as the descendants of migrants from other Muslim areas, but they are nonetheless definitely different, and the relations between Erind and the neighbouring villages are marked by the same stereotypes as the relations between Muslims and Christians usually are: people from Erind are said to be violent and dirty, to have no culture, and to be responsible for anything bad happening in the area.

At another level, the Christian Lunxhots oppose themselves to the neighbouring area of Kurvelesh, in Labëri. This opposition is expressed in two ways: by telling stories relating to events dating back to a vague 'before' (*më përpara*), and by presenting more recent events, especially those of 1997, as the repetition of earlier ones. In the stories the Lunxhots tell about the *kurbet*, the Labs were often portrayed as bandits who robbed the rich *kurbetlli* on their return from Istanbul, kidnapped villagers to ransom their families, and organised expeditions to steal sheep from the Christians. Again in stories of the Second World War, the Labs (and Muslims in general, including inhabitants of Libohovë and Lazarat) are always connected to the Ballists (the bad side, from the Lunxhots' point of view) whose main purpose in fighting was to attack the Christian Lunxhots as Christians rather than as Partisans. At the same time, and probably under the influence of official ideology, the Labs

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<sup>8</sup> However, in 2002 no more than 50 people attended the celebration, as a result of mass outmigration in the previous decade.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that here, as in other parts of Albania, the distinction is generally not made by the Orthodox Christians between Sunni and Bektashi Muslims, both of them being classified just as Muslims.

are recognised as brave and heroic patriots (*atdhetar*), whose violent character has been devoted to the affirmation and defence of the nation. But this construction seems to be limited to the times of war and of communism. After this parenthesis, the image of the Labs is again what it used to be in earlier times. The events of 1997 (and to a lesser extent, those of 1990-92) are interpreted in terms of a never-ending conflict between the Christian Lunxhots and the Muslim Labs: as before, Labs came to Lunxhëri (using the knowledge of the area and its inhabitants they got by working there as shepherds and woodcutters), robbed the travellers and – most significantly – stole the bells from the churches.<sup>10</sup>

At a third level, finally, all Albanian Muslims in general are seen as responsible for all the troubles and destruction that happened in Albania, [182] and as a majority group oppressing the Christian minority; they are considered as Others against whom the Lunxhots as Christians must fight and resist. This idea is not expressed by all the Lunxhots. Actually, if the official ideology did not prove strong enough to erase the traditional Muslim-Christian opposition at the local level, it seems to have had an effect on the way local people perceive the nation: as a place where Muslims and Christians are all alike and where difference does not matter. In that respect, religious difference is relevant only at the local level, in everyday social relationships. On the other hand, the people who ‘came out’ in the 1990s as opponents to communism, frequently parallel communism and Islam – both attempted to eradicate the Christian religion, both took the land from Christian landowners, both are related to fanaticism and intolerance. It is they who state that, as a Christian minority, the Lunxhots must be aware of the Muslim threat to their existence. The issue of a couple of new villages created during communism illustrates this case. The village of Asim Zenel, named after a partisan from Kurvelesh who was killed in July 1943, was created as the centre of an agricultural cooperative in 1947 on the road leading from Lunxhëri to Dropull. The people who were settled in the new village were mainly shepherds from Kurvelesh, and were Muslims. The same thing happened for the village of Arshi Llongo, while other Muslims from Kurvelesh settled in the villages of lower Lunxhëri (Karjan, Shën Todër, Valare) and in Suhë. As a result, it is not exceptional to hear today from the Lunxhots, such as one of my informants, a retired engineer living in Tirana, that ‘in 1945 a Muslim buffer-zone was created between Dropull and Lunxhëri to stop the Hellenisation of Lunxhëri. Muslims were thought to be more determined against Greeks. At that time, the danger of Hellenisation was real in Lunxhëri’. In the village of Këllëz people also regret that ‘Lunxhëri has been surrounded by a Muslim buffer-zone by Enver Hoxha, who was himself a Muslim’.

The relevance of religious communities (*fë*) in local and collective identity is also obvious in the fact that the Vlachs are often said by the Lunxhots to be of another *fë*, although they are both Orthodox Christians and go to the same churches. The feeling of otherness that characterises so strongly the relation between Vlachs and Lunxhots is thus expressed in term of religious communities; at the same time, the definition of Vlachs as

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<sup>10</sup> It is hardly necessary to point out what this image (and the relationship it expresses) has in common with the image of the (Muslim) Albanian migrant in Greece: both the Lab and the migrant are culturally constructed as Muslim, poor, living in or connected to wilderness (through shepherding, forest work or the need to hide away); both are ungrateful guests who betray their hosts, and so on.

another *fe* justifies the reluctance for intermarriage with them as well as a lack of trust and sympathy.

Apart from religion, ethno-national affiliation appears to be of great relevance today. It is clear that, in this border area, it has always been important to identify oneself with one or other of the national groups. It is also well-known that, in this part of the Balkans, and back into the Ottoman times, the ethnonyms 'Greek' and 'Orthodox Christian' were largely synonymous, so that it was difficult to be Orthodox *and* to claim not to be Greek. Lunxhëri is an illustration of that ambiguity or contradiction. By the beginning of the nineteenth century and later on, the British, French and [183] Austrian travellers who visited Lunxhëri, most of them arriving from Ioannina, described the Lunxhots as Albanian-speaking Orthodox Christians, and had the feeling that, starting north of Delvinaki, they were entering another country, although the political border did not exist at the time. Greek was not spoken as it was further south; there was a change in the way of life and manners of the peasants. As one traveller reported Hobhouse 1813:

Every appearance announced to us that we were now in a more populous country. (...) the plain was every where cultivated, and not only on the side of Argyro-castro [Gjirokastër]... but also on the hills which we were traversing, many villages were to be seen. The dress of the peasants was now changed from the loose woollen brogues of the Greeks, to the cotton kamisa, or kilt of the Albanian, and in saluting Vasily they no longer spoke Greek. Indeed you should be informed, that a notion prevails amongst the people of the country, that Albania, properly so called, or at least, the native country of the Albanians, begins from the town of Delvinaki; but never being able, as I have before hinted, to learn where the line of boundary is to be traced, I shall content myself with noticing the distinction in the above cursory manner.

In this place [Qestorat, in Lunxhëri] everything was on a very different footing from what it had been in the Greek villages. We experienced a great deal of kindness and attention from our host; but saw nothing in his face (though he was a Christian) of the cringing, downcast, timid look of the Greek peasant. His cottage was neatly plastered, and white-washed, and contained a stable and small ware-room below, and two floored chambers above, quite in a different style from what we had seen in Lower Albania. It might certainly be called comfortable; and in it we passed a better night than any since our departure from Ioannina.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, during the period of the *kurbet*, the Lunxhots were moving between two extreme positions regarding ethnic and national affiliation. On the one hand, there were those who joined the Albanian national movement, especially in Istanbul, and made attempts to spread a feeling of Albanian belonging in Lunxhëri. The well-known Koto Hoxhi (1825-1895) and Pandeli Sotiri (1843-1891), who participated in the opening of the first Albanian school in Korçë in 1887, were both from Lunxhëri (from the villages of Qestorat and Selckë). On the other hand were those who insisted on the Greekness of the Lunxhots and were opposed to the development of an Albanian national identity among the Christians. We recall here the names of the famous

Christodoulos (1820-1898) and Jorgos (1863-1920) Zografos – the latter having been the head of the Government of Autonomous Northern Epirus in Gjirokastër during the First World War – and of Vangelis Zappas (or Vangjel Zhapa, 1800-1865), all of them from Lunxhëri (Qestorat and Labovë e Zhapës). Between those two extreme positions were the majority of the people, and it is almost impossible today to say how they perceived [184] themselves. What is sure is that, in the context of the *kurbet*, most of them declared themselves as Greeks: memories of the *kurbet* show that in Istanbul the Lunxhots were living together with other Orthodox Christians from Greece and going to the same churches, and were part of the Greek minority there. In America as well, it seemed easier, or more meaningful, to declare themselves as Greek rather than as Albanians.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, it seems certain that most of the women spoke only Albanian, and no Greek, just as, in the first decades of twentieth century, Pogoni women spoke Greek and no Albanian Winnifrith 2002. Greek was, however, used in church services all over Lunxhëri, and an old woman from the village of Këllëz recalled that ‘we, the women, did not understand what the priest was saying’. It is also suggested, in the memories of the *kurbet*, that young men leaving Lunxhëri for Istanbul spoke only Albanian and would learn Greek and Turkish in Istanbul.

These fluid identities were to be crystallised at the time of the creation of the Albanian state (1913) and during the process of Albanisation that followed. Lunxhëri was actually included in the definition of Northern Epirus as a land of Hellenism that should have been given to the Greek state in 1913, and many families left the area, and Albania, during and after the First World War, to avoid becoming citizens of the new Albanian state. These people are called in Albanian propaganda *filogrek* and seem to have been powerful enough at some times to force pro-Albanian families to leave Lunxhëri. It the interwar period for instance, the village of Selckë is said to have been ‘full of *filogrek*’ and an informant told me the story of her husband’s father, who secretly left the village one night with his wife, after a cousin told him that his pro-Albanian commitment did not please a powerful pro-Greek family. They left for America, while the pro-Greek family eventually left for Greece. Their house is now occupied by a Vlach family. It must be noted that the development of those national feelings did not automatically follow the linguistic border between Greek and Albanian. The stress on language as a criterion of national identification was probably stronger in the minds of nationalist activists and members of the international commission for the drawing of the border than among the local population. As T. J. Winnifrith reports from the notes of a British archaeologist in 1924:

On 24 January Clarke left [Hillomo, in Albanian Pogon] for Labovë. He noted that then as now he was crossing a linguistic border from an area where Greek is spoken to one where it was merely understood. But he also said that there was little

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<sup>11</sup> This is illustrated by the story of third-generation migrants from Lunxhëri living today in Mexico and who, while doing research on their family history, discovered that their origin was in Albania, and not in Greece like their grandfather had always told them. When asked, the grandfather explained that at that time no one in Mexico knew about Albania, while they had heard about Greece, and that is why he kept saying they were coming from Greece. This story was collected in Saraqinishtë, from the grandfather’s brother.

difference between the architecture of Labovë and of the villages he had previously visited, and that both in Labovë and farther north at Saraganishtë [*sic* for Saraqinishtë] there was a certain amount of pro-Greek feeling Winnifrith 2002.

Due to the departures of the *filogrek* and to the policy of Albanisation undertaken by the Albanian state since its creation, the sense of national [185] belonging in Lunxhëri was, until recently, quite clear: not only are the Lunxhots ethnically and nationally Albanian, as opposed to the Greeks and Vlachs, they are even supposed to be the only true Albanians of the area, as opposed to the Muslims of Labëria who are seen as having abandoned their religion to become ‘Turks’ and, in so doing, have betrayed. The slightest variation from this discourse was suspected of being *filogrek*.

It must be noted that when people leave the question of national identity aside, for instance to tell their family histories, things become much less clear: shifts from one national identity to another are not rare, and they do not seem to be a problem as far as the individual or familial level is concerned. Several families thus acknowledge a Greek origin a few generations ago, others recognise branches that ‘became’ Greek just by crossing the border, and so on. This is for instance the case of an informant from Qestorat, who, although being definitely Albanian as far as national identity is concerned, and very critical vis-à-vis the Greeks, tells the story of his father, arrived from Athens in 1942 and who ‘learned Albanian here, by himself’.

In fact, the ‘exclusive Albanianness’ is still dominant as a discourse, emigration and the loosening of state control have brought radical changes in the sense of belonging. To claim a Greek origin or Greek familial connections is not a problem anymore as far as the state is concerned, and it is even considered a positive feature as far as emigration to Greece is concerned. Most of the Lunxhots in Greece present themselves as Northern Epirotes, and any evidence of Greek nationality, *kombësi greke*, is looked for as a positive feature in the context of migration.

### **The impact of migration in Lunxhëri**

As can be seen, the construction of collective identity in Lunxhëri cannot be separated from the vicinity of the Greek border and from the previous migration phase, *kurbet*. In fact, both the changing status of the border and whether mobility is permitted or not, have contributed to shape the local discourse on what it is to be a Lunxhot. This is illustrated by the way local people talk about themselves today in relation to emigration, and on how they perceive the changes to their identity brought by emigration.

According to the people living in Lunxhëri, the first characteristic of the new period of migration since 1990 is its demographic aspect: people have left massively (*kanë ikur shumë*), the villages have turned into deserted places (*shkretëtirë*), and only older people have remained (*vetëm pleqtë kanë mbetur*). As a matter of fact, a walk through the villages reveals – as in other parts of Albania – lots of closed or abandoned houses, and the land is obviously

not cultivated everywhere. In the village of Selckë for instance, from 65 families (*familje*, i. e. married couple and children; two couples living in the same house count as two families) in 1990, only 22 have remained, [186] with 53 individuals. The ones who left have gone mainly to Greece (33 families), and some also to Gjirokastër (5) and to other places in Albania (5). This desertification is opposed both to the period of communism, when most of the villages had their own school, several shops and small workshops, a museum and sometimes a clinic or a hospital (*ambulancë*); and to the period of the *kurbet*, which is paradoxically remembered as a time of dense social relationships. In fact, when the consequences of the *kurbet* are considered, it is mainly in positive terms, that is in terms of wealth and culture (*kulturë*) as well as in terms of demographic expansion. The *kurbet* is sometimes explained as resulting from the inability of the land to bear such a large population.

By contrast, the new emigration brings only negative consequences: the migrants do not return as the *kurbetlli* used to, and do not send money back to support the development of the village. In other words, they stop being members of the village, turning it into a desert. Although there is evidence of migrants sending money to restore the church or buy new icons, this is considered very little in comparison to the complete churches, schools, roads and bridges that the *kurbetlli* are said to have funded. In Qestorat for instance, people regret that when each migrant family was asked to contribute 20,000 drachmas (approximately 70 euros) for the restoration of the small church of Saint Mary, only some actually sent money.

For younger generations, who did not live at the time of the *kurbet*, the present-day situation is opposed to the one that prevailed during communism, ‘at the time of the cooperative’ (*në kohën e kooperativës*). Those times of dense social relationships are recreated only during religious feasts, when the migrants come back to the village for a few days.

Together with the demographic aspect, there is a sense of cultural loss. As many Lunxhots say, ‘with emigration, everything goes away’: houses, with their traditional architecture and furniture, fall in ruins, customs and rituals vanish, the sense and pride of belonging disappear, schools and shops are closed.

Moreover, the demographic aspect has an ethnic dimension which is frequently mentioned by the Lunxhots: the first ones to have left the village, with no plan to return, were the Vlachs. Forming a large part of the population in almost every village by the end of communism, they are said to be responsible for the death of the villages. If we introduce this ethnic dimension into the figures for migration concerning the village of Selckë, we do indeed find that Vlach families are more likely to be in Greece.

It is true that in several villages (Selckë, Nokovë, Mingull, Stegopul), the Vlachs outnumbered the ‘villagers’ (*fsbatarë* – this is how the Lunxhots call themselves and are called by the Vlachs) by 1990 and that they were the first ones to leave, in consequence of both their feeling of fear and actual experience of persecution dating back to communist

time, and the connections they had kept (or easily reactivated) on the other side of the border. [187] It is, however, difficult to make a clear distinction between the Vlachs and the others in terms of relationship to the village (Table 1); and the image of the former as being responsible for the death of the villages is something of a stereotype. As a matter of fact, if the Lunxhots have remained more numerous, it is often because they have fewer possibilities to leave, and thus are forced to remain.

**Table 1 – Migration of families in the village of Selckë**

	Vlach families	Lunxhot families	Total
Still in the village	9	13	22
In Greece	19	14	33
In Gjirokastër	2	3	5
Other places in Albania	3	2	5
Total	33	32	65

Although it is not expressed as such by people, it must be stressed here that emigration has also brought a change in the ethnic relations between Vlachs and villagers: the former moved from a position of substantial inferiority (their integration in Lunxhëri was never complete, as the lack of intermarriage clearly shows) to a position of economic success. This raises envy and jealousy among the villagers. The biggest and most luxurious houses belong to the Vlachs, who are also the most dynamic and successful entrepreneurs. In consequence, far from contributing to the vanishing of ethnic differentiation between the two groups, migration has given rise to a new formulation of the boundary: the Vlachs are now the victims of a form of segregation developed by people, the Lunxhots, who suffer from their new position of inferiority in front of people who were traditionally considered as inferior. If most of the Lunxhots still speak in bad terms of the Vlachs, as they did in communist times (although all discriminatory behaviour was officially forbidden), they publicly insist on their qualities. The Vlachs are not only considered as backward and illiterate shepherds; people also praise their (cunning) intelligence and their courage as well as the fact that they are the most hardworking and successful in the new economic system.

At the same time, it appears that the present behaviour of the Vlachs recalls the behaviour of the Lunxhots themselves in earlier times – 1950s and 1960s – when they massively left their villages to move to Tirana and other Albanian cities. Just like the Vlachs, most of them had no will to return and they abandoned or sold their houses (which were then occupied by the Vlachs). However, the Lunxhots never present themselves as having abandoned their villages. The development of village nostalgia among urban migrants from Lunxhëri in the 1990s is indicative of the will of the Lunxhots to differentiate themselves from the Vlachs. Living either in Gjirokastër, Durrës or Tirana, the activists of the Society Lunxhëria, [188] created in 1995, cultivate their Lunxhot origin by constructing an image of the past from which the Vlachs are excluded, and by actually excluding them from joining the Society ('they have their own Vlach society anyway').

Connected to this new formulation, or renegotiation of the ethnic boundary between Lunxhots and Vlachs, is the stress on a specific Lunxhot identity, exclusive of both the Muslims and the Vlachs and, as will be illustrated later, based on a rather ambiguous relationship to the Greeks. Basically, to be a Lunxhot is to be Christian (and not Muslim), Albanian (and not Greek), and ‘autochthonous’ (*autokton*) in opposition to foreigners (like the Vlachs). It is striking how most of the Lunxhots, living either in Lunxhëri or in Gjirokaštër or elsewhere in Albania (or even in Greece), insist on the fact that they are *autokton*. These people who left what they consider their place of origin, or who plan to leave it, all claim to have a homeland or, as it is sometimes used in Albanian, ‘roots’ (*rrënjë*) in Lunxhëri.<sup>12</sup> On the whole, this is not surprising from migrants and second-generation migrants. The interesting point is that by using the word *autokton*, instead of the Albanian word *vendas*, they attempt to give the fact a kind of scientific reality: the use of *autokton* comes as the result or summary of a long historical argumentation that cannot be discussed further here. Their belonging to the place is not only a matter of fact, but has to do with historical truth. It gives them a specific and stable position on the ethno-historical map of Epirus, and a kind of historical and moral priority. ‘Lunxhëri is an ancient land’, says a retired ethnographer now living in Tirana, ‘its inhabitants descend from the Chaones [an Illyrian tribe], they are pure Albanians (*puro shqiptar*). This is evidenced by Antigone [an archaeological site south-west of Saraqinishtë]: Lunxhëri was populated by the inhabitants of Antigone when the city was burned down’. This historical continuity is also stressed by the historian Zija Shkodra who writes: ‘numerous archaeological findings in the villages Këllëz, Dhoksat, Erind, and especially in the ancient city of Antigonea to the south-west of Saraqinishtë evidence that Lunxhëri has been populated since the dawn of History’ Shkodra 2002.

In the same way, when they want to mark the boundary with the Muslims and the Vlachs, the Lunxhots call themselves ‘ethnic Lunxhots’ (*lunxhotë etnikë*). The word ‘ethnic’ refers here to blood and descent, but also to a closure of social relationships, expressed by the stress on endogamy: ethnic Lunxhots marry ‘inside’ (*brenda për brenda*) and are proud to do it, as a marker of their aristocratic character. The concept of ‘ethnic Lunxhot’ (as well as the Lunxhot category itself) is used to maintain or recreate the links between the migrants who have left Lunxhëri to go to other parts of Albania, Greece, or elsewhere, as is clearly shown by the creation of the ‘cultural and patriotic association Lunxhëria’ (*shoqata kulturore atdhetare Lunxhëria*) in 1995. One of the aims of the association, according to its first president, is to revitalise the links between the [189] descendants of the *kurbetllë* who stayed abroad, and the Lunxhots who live in Albania. The association intends also to preserve the culture and history of the area, by collecting songs and proverbs, editing books and videos on traditional life in Lunxhëri. It is mainly through the work of the association that the new Lunxhot identity is being created, and its main activists are of course urban and educated people in search of an idealised rural origin. Quite significantly, all inhabitants of Lunxhëri are *de facto* members of the association, except Vlachs and Muslims, who have to justify fifty years of presence in Lunxhëri to join the association.

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<sup>12</sup> On ‘roots’ as a metaphor in the Balkans, see Schwartz 1997).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, migration and the opening of the border brought radical changes in the way the Lunxhots perceive their relation with Greece and the Greeks. During communism, when Greece was an enemy and the Greeks of Albania suspected of sympathy with the enemy, the Lunxhots seem to have stressed their Albanianness in order to keep away from their Greek neighbours of Pogon and Dropull. This was facilitated when the main common characteristic that might be seen as uniting Greeks and Lunxhots, religion, was abolished in 1967. Many of them having joined the partisans during the Second World War, and subsequently welcome the communist regime, they have been very receptive to nationalist propaganda. In this context, Greece was the enemy of the Albanian nation and tried to destroy it by using religion and violence. It is thus extremely difficult to find people in Lunxhëri who support the Greek claims on Northern Epirus and who talk in positive terms of the politics of Greece at the time the state border was established (1912-20); most of the Greek supporters went away at the end of the First World War, others in 1944. At the same time, intermarriage between Greeks (from the minority) and Lunxhots occurred more and more often, probably as a result of the exclusion of the Muslims and Vlachs from matrimonial strategies, when lots of Lunxhot families had left to go and settle in Central Albania.<sup>13</sup> Such marriages could also be a way for Greeks to get a better life-chance – as it is acknowledged that during communism some members of the Greek minority declared themselves Albanian in order to get better living conditions.

The nineteenth-century figures of Kristaq and Jorgo Zografi, already mentioned, are a good illustration of the ambiguous, fluid and evolving position of Lunxhots vis-à-vis Greece and the Greeks. Until 1990, Kristaq (Christodoulos) and his son Jorgo (Iorgos) Zografi (Zographos) were stigmatised in Albanian historiography as *shovinistë* and *borgjezë* (chauvinist, bourgeois) who had worked to destroy the Albanian nation by pretending that all Orthodox Christians were Greek or should be Greek, and by supporting the opening of Greek schools in Lunxhëri and elsewhere. In consequence of this negative propaganda, the last people who still hold the family name Zografi in their village of origin, Qestorat, were persecuted during communism. It is worth mentioning that, notwithstanding the common family name, the actual link between those people and their [190] alleged ancestors Kristaq and Jorgo is not at all clear, and it was probably safer in earlier times not to insist on that link. Today however, the last Zografi openly claim to be direct descendants of Kristaq and Jorgo, as they are now becoming positive characters – especially Kristaq. At a time when *kurbet* is presented as a golden age, Kristaq Zografi appears as a hero, a glorious son of Lunxhëri who became a rich and influential man in the capital city, Istanbul. Even more, he used his wealth and influence to help his village: the school he opened and supported in Qestorat between 1874 and 1891 Kitsou 1985 is now presented as one of the best examples of the high cultural level of Lunxhëri, and its re-opening as a museum of Lunxhëri has been overseen by the association Lunxhëria. Several bridges, churches and roads around Qestorat are connected to the name of Kristaq Zografi, who is said to have paid for them. However, the statue that was erected in front of the school building in 1989

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<sup>13</sup> From what can be seen from genealogies, the Lunxhots who moved from Lunxhëri married other urban Lunxhots rather than marrying back in Lunxhëri.

is not that of Kristaq, but of Koto Hoxhi, the Albanian nationalist from Qestorat who fought against Kristaq and his Greek school (and whose granddaughter married Kristaq's grandson). Today nevertheless, even among communists, people go as far as to talk of Kristaq as a 'patriot' (*atdhetar*).

All this is only one example of how the construction of a new Lunxhot identity uses parts of the Greek past of the area and overlooks the previous polarisation between being Greek or Albanian. Stories about the Second World War are another example of how the Lunxhots emphasise their good relations with the Greeks and their ability to communicate with them: Greek soldiers and officers seem to have been welcome in the Lunxhots' houses during the counter-offensive against the Italian invasion army in 1940-41, and people recall today how well the Greek officers were treated by the Greek-speaking and aristocratic Lunxhots who had lived in Istanbul or in the United States. A villager from Këllëz thus recalls how Iorgos (George) Papadopoulos (who was to lead the 1974 *coup*) stayed six months in his house from June to December 1940 (*sic*). 'Italian soldiers did not know to fight. The Greeks were cleverer. Greeks were welcomed here, even though they pretended it was their own country'.<sup>14</sup>

The relations with Greece in the new context of migration are even more complicated. On the one hand, there is a feeling of gratitude (even more if the experience of migration has been successful) and of cultural proximity: many Lunxhots migrants (or their parents) had had contact with the Greek side of the border before the war, and memories of that time are being revitalised, mainly in a quest for potential support in migration (see Sintès 2003). Religion is also a ground on which proximity with the Greeks is openly claimed: as has been said before, the Lunxhots insist today on their Christian identity, and Christianity offers in a way a large community that unites Albanian Christians and Greeks beyond national antagonism. People usually talk about their re-discovery and re-appropriation of religion in Greece, which took the form of baptism, wedding and participation to the main Orthodox Christian holidays. [191] At the same time, whatever the Lunxhots say about their level of development, or the cultural advance and prosperity brought either from the *kurbet* or from communism, they recognise – although not all the time openly – that Lunxhëri, as a part of post-communist Albania, is much less developed than Greece, and that the Lunxhots feel, and are usually treated, as all other Albanians feel and are treated in Greece: as coming from a backward country, and still not on a par with the standards of living of modern European society.

On the other hand, there is a feeling of exclusion and anger when people talk about the difficulties they encounter when they want to go to Greece. They complain (as do many other Albanian migrants) about the cost and scarcity of visas, about violence and racism in Greek society and about the extremely uneasy situation of most Albanian migrants in Greece. They envy members of the Greek minority who cannot only migrate easily to Greece but also, if they decide to stay in Albania, cross the border wherever they like to go

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<sup>14</sup> On Greek occupation of Southern Albania, see Fischer 1999: 79-81).

shopping in Ioannina. They also envy the ‘pension of the Greek’ (*pensioni i grekut*) that Greece offers to retired people of the Greek minority in Albania.

### **Conclusion: new transnationalism?**

What is striking in the discussion on the rise of new collective identities at local level, in the context of new migration, is that more or less the same elements are used by everyone to assess their own specificity and excellence. For instance, when the Lunxhots talk about their Christian identity, their high level of culture and the experience of *kurbet* from which it originates, they do not seem to be aware that their neighbours in Zagori, Pogon and Dropull do more or less the same. It seems that the conjunction of the border context, national enculturation processes Karakasidou 1997 and migratory experience offers a rather limited number of traits that can be used in the formulation of local identities. The situation on the Greek-Albanian border is not that far from the one described by Michael Kearney on the US-Mexico border Kearney 1998 :

Denied permanent residence in their homeland by economic necessity and denied naturalisation by the United States, Mixtec ‘alien’ migrants construct a new identity out of the bricolage of their transnational existence. What form does this transnational identity take? It coalesces as *ethnicity*, as an ethnic consciousness, which is the supremely appropriate form for collective identity to take in the age of transnationalism. In my research I have observed how Mixtec ethnicity arises as an alternative to nationalist consciousness and as a medium to circumscribe not space, but collective identity precisely in those border areas where nationalist boundaries of territory and identity are most contested and ambiguous.

[192] In this context, it seems that Albanian national identity is only a part of the new Lunxhot ethnic identity: you have to be Albanian in order to be a Lunxhot, as you have to be Christian, but that is not enough. Everything is as if ethnicity was built on this contradiction, of being Albanian and Greek at the same time, or rather of being potential Greeks that chose to be Albanians. It is striking how the Lunxhots emphasise their knowledge of the border area, of the other side of the border, and the familiarity they used to have with the Greek side before the border was closed. It is also striking that people who most openly claim an Albanian identity and loyalty to the Albanian nation are at the same time making attempts to get forged certificates of Greek nationality!

Emigration and the opening of the border have brought a change in the local conception of identity: the Albanian-Greek opposition has given way to a more complex ‘bricolage’ based on memory of the *kurbet* and on a cultural and geographic proximity, and this can be seen as the marker of a new situation of transnationalism between Greece and Albania. This is the way the Lunxhots respond to the challenge of getting access to the Greek labour market.

National categories are still relevant at certain levels between Greece and Albania, and transnationalism in the border area does not mean the disappearance of national identification. However, in order to understand how things are working at lower levels, and especially in relation to migrants' strategies and behaviour, it is necessary to take into account other more ambiguous and changing categories.

As far as Lunxhëri is concerned, the idea of a national space closed by the state border has turned into the image of a transnational space occupied by several ethnic groups competing for job opportunities in Greece. These ethnic groups are not equal and their boundaries are, as ethnic boundaries usually are, mobile and negotiated. It is not easy, however, to assess to what extent this ethnicisation is due to the creation, by the migration process, of a transnational space where social antagonism is expressed in terms of ethnicity, or is a reaction to the end of the nationalist propaganda of the communist time.

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