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‘THE SON OF THREE FATHERS HAS NO HAT ON HIS HEAD’
Life and social representations in a Macedonian village of Albania

Gilles de Rapper

The village of Vrbnik/Vërnik (‘willow grove’) is located in South-eastern Albania, a few hundred metres from the Greek border. When I was conducting field research in that area, in 1995 and 1996, it had approximately 70 houses and 400 inhabitants. It is the only Macedonian-speaking village in that district. It does not belong to the group of Macedonian villages located on the Albanian shore of the Great Prespa Lake, who form the majority of the Macedonian minority in South-eastern Albania, and its inhabitants are willing to differentiate themselves from those of the Prespa villages.

When I was there in 1996, I was told that in 1993 the ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia in Albania came in Vërnik, gathered all the population of the village and told them that, since they were Macedonians, Macedonia was going to help them. That same year, Bulgarians also came to the village. They did not gather the population, but made clear to the people they met at their homes that the village was Bulgarian and that Bulgaria would do something for them. The same year again, a Greek man from Thessaloniki arrived and distributed food. He called for two or three old women speaking Greek and said that the village was Greek. In consequence, all the inhabitants were to receive a visa to go and work in Greece. In fact, since that time, no assistance has come to the village which, according to my informant, was in the position of a son who has three fathers, none of which is willing to offer him a hat.

In this paper, I will briefly describe the relations between Vërnik and local Albanians, between Vërnik its three potential fathers, and between Vërnik and the Prespa villages. The argument is that the way people from Vërnik perceive themselves is partly shaped by local conceptions and representations on Christians as opposed to Muslims, and on South as

opposed to North. It must be noted that I do not speak Macedonian and that I interviewed people in Vërnik in Albanian, all of them being bilingual. Actually, my fieldwork in Vërnik was only a very small part of a project on the construction of collective identities in the Devoll district¹.

Vërnik and the Albanians

Most border areas in the Balkans have been affected by a process of ‘nationalisation’ after the creation of the nation states, which, in this case, resulted in changes of place names, destruction of villages, and changes of population and affiliation. The village of Vërnik has not always been isolated as it is today: its inhabitants used to have close links with former Macedonian-speaking villages on the other side of the border. Inter-marriage, for instance, was common with the villages of Dhambel/Vambel, Smërdesh/Smerdesh and Kosinecë/Kosinec. On the Albanian side of the border, some villages registered as ‘Bulgarians’ by the French army in 1920 are today fully albanised: this is the case, for instance, of Zagradec, Shuëc and Rakickë, on the South side of the Prespa Lake. This albanisation probably happened through islamisation. The Albanian-speaking villages around Vërnik have also changed: some Christian villages have disappeared (Selcë) or become Muslim (Kapshticë), others have had their Slavic names changed during the communist period, as when Zagradec was called Buzëliqen (‘lake shore’), and Bozhigrad, Miras (‘the good place’).

The Devoll, the Albanian district in which Vërnik is included, is mainly Muslim². Christian villages are located in the upper valley of the Devoll River, and do not have relations with Vërnik. They are all Albanian-speaking Christians, although some old people have been to Greek village schools by the beginning of the 20th century. They are insisting on being Albanian and not Greek. Christians can also be found in the town of Bilisht, very close to Vërnik, and in the village of Tren, two hours from Vërnik (footpath). Those are either autochthonous, either people who have moved or married in from other Christian villages of the district (especially from Hoçisht and Ziçisht). There are also a number of Macedonians from Vërnik settled in Bilisht, especially among people working in public administrations (school, hospital...), as Bilisht is the centre of the Devoll district.

On the other side of the border, in Greece, Albanian-speaking Muslims left some of the Kastoria villages in 1924 and were replaced by Christians from Anatolia: this was for instance the case of Ieropigi (former Shag) and Dipotamia (former Revan). Inhabitants of those villages all speak Greek today, but a part of them were Turkish-speakers on their

¹ I am indebted to Galia Valtchinova, who made valuable comments during the discussion, and to Victor Friedman, who read and commented the first draft of this paper.

² In 1913, Vërnik (and a few other villages of the area, like Kapshticë) was first attributed to Greece. The border was changed in 1924 and the village became a part of Albania. See Arben Puto, *Qeveria demokratike e 1924-s për zgjidhjen e problemeve të mbetura pezull në caktimin e kufijve të Shqipërisë. Çështje të lëvizjes demokratike dhe revolucionare shqiptare në vitet 1921-1924*. Tiranë, 1977, p. 173-99.

arrival³. Macedonians villages were abandoned in 1949. Some of them have disappeared (Dhambel and Llabanicë, both on the border), others are today inhabited by Vlachs who moved in from Ioannina and Thesprotia⁴ in 1956. They speak Greek, Vlach and *çamërisht*, the Albanian dialect spoken in Thesprotia. Being very close to the border, those villages are also inhabited by soldiers and policemen coming from other parts of Greece.

Today, if the inhabitants of Vërnik claim that they are Aegean Macedonians, the way they are perceived by the others is not as clear as that: if the name *Maqedonas* is used by the Albanians living in the neighbouring villages, they usually prefer to call people from Vërnik using *Bullgar*, *Shulink* or *Shule*, or even *kaur*. The first one, *bullgar*, is the general ethnic name for any Slav-speaking population in the area. It is also used when explaining the many Slav toponyms of the area: local people usually explain those place names as a consequence of a Bulgarian invasion. It is interesting to note that the Macedonians of Vërnik are not as eager as Albanians to give a Slavic etymology to the local place names, as if they did not want to contest the current Albanian occupation of the area, or to acknowledge the Slavic origin of those names. It must be said however that Muslim Albanians are oversensitive on this matter, as they search for any evidence of their Christian (meaning autochthonous and European) origin, and as all Slavic place names are said to be Christians. In this respect, Macedonians from Vërnik seem to be more careful. It can be noted in comparison that Albanians in Macedonian attribute an Albanian etymology to most toponyms of western Macedonia which, as in Albania, are of Slavic origin. In this way, they justify the anteriority of Albanian occupation of those lands⁵. The use of *bullgar* by the Albanians not only reflects a general usage before the First World War, but is also revealing of the very common tendency in the area to deny the other’s identification.

The second denomination, *shule* or *shulink*, is said by Albanians to come from the name of one of the Prespa villages, Shulin, whose name was changed to Dielas during the communist period. It originally applies to the Slav-speaking inhabitants of South-eastern Albania. It is often used with the general meaning of ‘non Albanian inhabitants of Albania’ and is then applied also to Vlachs. It is derogatory. The use of both names *bullgar* and *shule* is contested by the inhabitants of Vërnik themselves, who insist on the use of the name *maqedonas*.

The third name, *kaur*, is different. It is the very common and derogatory word Muslims use to designate Christians as ‘infidels’. Local people use it very commonly and are not always aware of its depreciative meaning. It is also used by Christians, both Macedonian and Albanian, to refer to themselves. Moreover, from an original religious meaning, it sometimes takes a more general meaning, aiming at the substantialisation of

³ It is also said – by Albanians – that some Albanian-speakers remained, having turned to Christians to avoid the exchange of population between Greece and Turkey. On this little known aspect of the Treaty of Lausanne, see Gilles de Rapper, *Ta choria tis Kastorias i i fantasiaki meionotita. Synchrona Themata* (Athens), n° 63, April-June 1997, p. 108-11.

⁴ If I understand correctly the ethnic name ‘Çam’ used by my Macedonian informant together with ‘Çoban’.

⁵ See Gilles de Rapper, 1998. *Crisis in Kosovo: Reactions in Albania and in Macedonia at the Local Level*. Rome, CSS/CEMES (Ethnobarometer Working Paper Series, n° 3), p. 19.

religious communities. As I was travelling one day on the road between Bilisht and Vërnik with two young Albanian Muslims from Bilisht, a group of Macedonians from Vërnik came towards us on their way to the market, speaking Macedonian among themselves. Once they were away, one of the boys whispered to me: ‘Infidels (*kaurë*)! Did you hear the way they were speaking?’ In this particular case, language is a way to define a religious community: from a Muslim point of view, all Christians are not speakers of another language, but some of them, like Greeks or Macedonians, are. In fact, generally speaking, the way Muslims are talking about the Other as *kaur* has very little to do with religion itself, but rather with a wide range of markers (food, dress, housing, occupation, public behaviour,...) tending at the ethnicisation of ‘infidels’.

On the other hand, inhabitants of Vërnik usually define themselves on the basis of language, as Macedonians, or on the basis of religion, as Christians (sometimes using the word *kaur*). As we shall see, they do not call their non-Macedonian neighbours ‘Albanians’, as they tend to have a civic conception of the state, in which all inhabitants of Albania are, in a way, ‘Albanians’. As is usual in this area of mixed population, the Other is defined on the basis of religious communities, and people from Vërnik talk about their Albanian-speaking neighbours as Muslims, using the words *turk* and *mubamedan*. The first one is used by the Muslims themselves, who insist however on its strictly religious meaning whenever it may cause ambiguity on their national affiliation: they are not Turks in a national meaning, but only in a religious meaning, as Muslims. The second word is only used by Christians to talk about Muslims. It is considered derogatory by the Muslims who insist on being called *myslyman* by non-Muslims.

The fact that there is no Albanian-speaking Christian village in the vicinity of Vërnik makes it easy to talk about the Albanian-speakers as Muslims rather than as Albanians. From the Muslim point of view, Albanian-speaking and Macedonian-speaking Christians are all *kaur*, ‘infidels’, and, on that basis, share common features, either positive or negative.

Language and religion are one way to define the group. Another way is marriage. It is acknowledged on both sides that Macedonians did not intermarry with non-Macedonians. This was not a problem as long as the village could maintain links with other Macedonian villages in the area. It changed after the Greek civil war in 1949, when Vërnik became isolated on the Albanian side of the border. Instead of marrying Muslims, people from Vërnik turned to the other Macedonian Christian villages of Albania, those of Prespa, and also to the Albanian-speaking Christians of the area. Apparently, those marriages involve Macedonian men and Albanian women. I have hardly heard of Macedonian women married in an Albanian village. The same pattern is found between Albanian-speaking Muslims and Christians. Muslim women marry Christian men, but Christians do not give their daughters to Muslims. Intermarriage does not mean equality nor reciprocity. There are also a great number of people originating from Vërnik who are settled in towns; they are sought by people from the village for marriage. Altogether however, marrying inside is still a characteristic of Vërnik, and a way to maintain the boundary between Vërnik and the Albanian-speaking villages.

What are the relations between Vërnik and its three fathers?

The metaphor of ‘father’ and ‘son’ is interesting, as it underlines the importance of kinship and primordial conceptions in the construction of collective identity, and also because it is used by the Albanians of Macedonia in relation with Albania, the ‘mother state’: in 1998, when the crisis broke out in Kosovo, one could here in western Macedonia villagers stating that whatever was to happen in Kosovo, the ties between Albanians of Albania and Albanians from abroad would never be broken, ‘because a mother never abandons her children’.

The most distant of the three fathers, Bulgaria, is not recognised as a father. People insist on the fact that they are Macedonians and not Bulgarians. ‘When the Bulgarians occupied the area in 1877, says one of them, it was hard to understand them’. On the Albanian side, people never forget to tell the Macedonians that their language is Bulgarian and that everyone used to call them *bulgar* before the name Macedonian came into use. Some informants remember that Bulgarians came to the village to study their dialect and ‘concluded’ it was Bulgarian rather than Macedonian, but Bulgaria looks to far away anyway for people to feel any closeness.

It thus seems that Vërnik is much closer to Macedonia: people from Vërnik claim that Macedonians exist as a nation, presently divided in three parts, Vardar, Aegean and Pirin Macedonia. They themselves belong to the Aegean Macedonia and are aware that they speak a dialect close to the one spoken in Kastoria. Due to the intermarriage relations between Vërnik and other villages on the Greek side of the border, some people from Vërnik have relatives who, after leaving their villages during the Greek civil war, settled in Macedonia. Already by the end of the eighties, they could obtain a visa to go and visit their relatives. When the Albanian border opened, some of them used this opportunity to leave Albania, and used Macedonia as a bridge to more distant countries. They were surprised to realise that very few people in Macedonia knew about their village. Actually, at the same time, their Albanian neighbours were not aware of the existence of an Albanian minority in Macedonia. Still in 1996, Devoll Albanians knew very little about Macedonian Albanians, who seem to have been more or less included in the broader category of ‘Kosovar’. Most public attention in Albania was then focused on Kosovo, just like it is more focused in Macedonia on Macedonians of Prespa and Gollabordë/Golo Brdo.

However, there was no massive migration towards Macedonia. The first crossings of the border led people into the Greek villages just on the other side. As in the Albanian-speaking villages of the area, the only assistance comes from Greece, not directly but through the work of the ones who are called ‘refugees’. The way people from Vërnik perceive Greece and the emigration towards Greece does not differ very much from what Albanian-speaking migrants say. The latter insist on the fact that they have to hide their religion and pretend to be Christians; the Macedonians say that they have to hide their nationality (*kombësi*) and pretend to be Greek. When refugees from Vërnik tell stories about their experience in Greece, they usually identify themselves with the Albanians and

complain about the way Albanians are treated by the Greeks, in the same manner as the Albanian-speaking Muslims do. And, as Albanians often tell stories about Albanian-speakers still living in villages of Northern Greece by whom they were helped in hard times, people from Vërnik oppose the behaviour of the Greeks to the one of the Macedonian-speakers they meet in Northern Greece. Altogether, there is no trust in the Greek state and Greek population, and common religion does not seem to bring any feeling of closeness even though, at the local level, attempts were made to celebrate Easter together with Greek villages on the other side of the border. In this matter however, the fact that those villages are ex-Macedonian villages now inhabited by newcomers (mostly Vlachs in Smërdesh and Kosinecë) might not help in developing good relations between the two sides of the border.

The sense of identity of the people from Vërnik does not rely on any identification with a specific population outside Albania. More precisely, their Macedonianness is mainly based on their identification with a part of Aegean Macedonians (Kastoria), which was exiled or destroyed. It seems that their sense of identity has very much to do with the memory of the times prior to the Greek civil war and to the creation of the border, thus with local society and history. In order to understand how people from Vërnik talk about themselves, we have to look at another level, inside local society.

Minority inside the minority

First of all, there are also lines of division inside the Macedonian community in Albania, and these seem as important as the others in the construction of an image of the self in Vërnik. It is generally said that there are three groups of Macedonians in Albania. The first one are the Gollobordas, who are Macedonian-speaking Muslims living in East-Central Albania ; the second one include the villages of Prespa, who are said to be Vardar Macedonians ; the third one is made of the village of Vërnik alone, and is felt to belong to Aegean Macedonia. As Muslims, Gollobordas are usually considered as Albanians rather than Macedonians (also they are not recognized by the Albanian state as belonging to the Macedonian minority of Albania), and they intermarry with Albanian Muslims rather than with Macedonian-speaking Christians.

It is interesting to look at the way people from Vërnik talk about themselves as opposed to the Macedonian villages of Prespa. As said before, Vërnik is felt by its inhabitants to belong to Aegean Macedonia, while the villages of Prespa belong to Vardar Macedonia. From Vërnik’s point of view, this has consequences for the characteristics of the inhabitants. As one of my informant states: ‘People from Vërnik have bright faces and bright eyes, while those from Prespa are darker and thicker; they look more like Bulgarians. Compared to Prespa, Vërnik also has more culture: clothes, cooking, marriages, have been influenced by Europe, especially through Greece, who has been active in that field, and also directly through people from the village who emigrated. Prespa villages are more primitive.’ Generally speaking, Vërnik has more ‘culture’, *kulturë*: its inhabitants are quiet

and honest, they have been to school, they have contacts with the outside world, etc. Those from Prespa are presented as backward peasants, smuggling all the time with Macedonia.

In fact, those images of the self and the other lead us beyond the opposition between Prespa villages and Vërnik. They are in fact very close to the way local society perceives the differences between Orthodox Christians and Muslims, as well as the differences between North and South. For instance, Christians claim to have more culture than their Muslim neighbours – and this is acknowledged by the Muslims – owing to the fact that they travelled abroad and went to school. In the same way, people from the South picture people from the North as backward and violent highlanders, looking for easy money through smuggling and crime, while those from the South quietly work in Greece. The construction of the self and the other from Vërnik’s point of view clearly uses a stock of images and oppositions which are also used in the broader local society when people want to define themselves in terms of religious or regional identity. Macedonians and Albanians share the same representations of the self and of social life.

This fact supports, in a sense, the Albanians who say that the Macedonians of Vërnik are closer to Albanians than to other Macedonians, as they are ‘albanised’. In fact, even the inhabitants of Vërnik recognize that their language is full of Albanian borrowings, especially to express features of modern life. The collapse of the communist regime also meant a better circulation for people, and many people from Vërnik moved to Bilisht and other Albanian towns, where their children will not have the possibility to learn Macedonian at school. Notwithstanding the efforts to have education in Macedonian during the first four years of schooling, Albanian alphabet seems to be more easily used by people from Vërnik than the Macedonian. It is worth mentioning that when I asked a 14 year-old boy from Vërnik to teach me the Macedonian alphabet, he was unable to remember all the letters without the help of his young brother of 10, who was still going to the village primary school. As Christina Kramer shows, people in Vërnik use Albanian orthography in their correspondence with their relatives who live in Canada where they did not learn Cyrillic and are more used to English orthography⁶.

The conclusion we might draw from this is that at the very same time it is claiming its specificity, a minority might use categories and representations that show its assimilation to the broader society. People from Vërnik might be Macedonian rather than Albanian, the way they define themselves is the same as the one used by Albanians to define themselves in the context of local society. It is also interesting to note that, as a minority group, Macedonians of Vërnik use different levels of identification, which are not necessarily in conflict: they are Aegean Macedonians, they belong to the Albanian state, and acknowledge the importance of Greece as a vehicle of culture. On the other hand, they reject the possibility of using also the Bulgarian level of identity – probably because they see no interest in it. The third father might in fact be Albania rather than distant Bulgaria.

⁶ Christina Kramer, *The Reshaping of Identity in Vrbnik, a Macedonian Village in Albania*, manuscript, 2001.