CULTURAL HERITAGE AND IDENTITY
IN TERMS OF LABOUR MOBILITY
(THE CASE OF ABANIANS FROM MACEDONIA)

Ivaylo Markov

Movement of people and groups of people is inherent to human communities and it is historically evidenced throughout different periods of human existence. This mobility may be caused by various factors – may it be from curiosity towards the unknown, flee from unfavorable natural conditions, seeking asylum, following foreign aggression or searching for livelihood or better living conditions. In this work I shall not consider the typology and classification of the various kinds of migrational movements, all the more that sometimes it is hard to delineate them in their pure form. Therefore I will leave theorizing on this subject for another study and will focus on the field of my particular interest – movement of people and groups in relation to searching new possibilities and means of livelihood. These would be the so called labour migrations. This type of movement of people from one place to another, in its various aspects is part of the research field of a number of scholarly disciplines – demography, economy, history, sociology, politology. The contemporary ethnology with its specific methodology also plays an important role in the research work for this subject.

In the context of the Balkan Peninsula population mobility it is a centuries-old tradition that people migrate from their birthplace to practice various activities with the aim of earning a living. Historically examined, within the Ottoman Empire large groups of people would leave their homes, in order to perform seasonal or temporary (for a few years) wage labour,

surmounting local, ethnic, religious, cultural (as well as political after the dissolution of the Empire) borders. This type of cross-border labour mobility has acquired the denomination *"working abroad for a living/ gurbet/ gurbetluk"* and/or *"profiteer/ pechalbarstvo"* in the Balkan languages (Христов 2003: 223, Hristov 2008: 115). In the traditional Balkan cultures the "gurbet" is predominantly male occupation and refers to a wide range of economic activities – agricultural in nature (hired herdsmen for instance), as well as related to performing various craft jobs (masonry, pottery etc.). Gurbet has seasonal character – workers depart early in the spring and return in the late autumn.

The character, routes and directions of the temporary migrations however change several times due to the turbulent and ambiguous historical destiny of this part of the European continent. Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and establishing the borders of the new national countries on the Balkans at the end of XIX and the beginning of the XX century interrupts some of the traditional routes of the seasonal workers and redirects their flows. Since the beginning of the XX century, and especially with the beginning of both the Balkan wars and the First World War, large part of these seasonal workers begins migrating to the United States (Христов 2008: 449). Since the 60-ies of the XX century, due to recruitment of manpower for the economy of some western European countries, the Balkans become one of the sources of the so called *"gastarbeiters"* – workers invited legally for a set period of time, firstly in the Federal Republic of Germany[1], and later in other countries as well. Along with the political and economic changes in the Balkan area during the last 15 years, the EU enlargement and the process of globalization, migrant labour flows are not reduced, on the contrary. The movement of labourers changes its seasonal character thus evading the historically familiar traditional model of

"gurbet" – working abroad for profit now lasts a few years, and often the migrant would become *"emigrant"*, settling down in the respective country.

In this context of labour mobility one of the important questions facing the scholars is related to the dynamics of the cultural and social models and identities, carried and developed by individuals and groups, their reflection upon seeing them off communities, as well as upon the migrants themselves, who live temporarily or for a long time in diasporas[2]. Apadurai defines migration and media as the factors that brought the greatest cultural influences in the 20th century and that radically changed human cultural environment and stereotypical view of the world (Apadurai 1996). In the case of migration, as considered by us, the individual and the groups bring along their cultural traditions – language, religious practices, festivities and customs, daily habits and behavior, social relations, etc. However, migrants acquire new experiences as well as adopt new cultural habits that undoubtedly change the cultural model. Returning to his home place, the "gurbetchia" (the went-abroad-to-work) brings new overview to the world, new cultural enlightenment, political ideas which sometimes may even seem threatening with regards to preserving the identity and national culture.

Based on my PhD dissertation regarding the problem of labour migrations of Albanians from Macedonia, today my specific subject of scrutiny would be the Albanian population from that part of the Balkans. The purpose of the short overview is to examine some aspects, to delineate perspectives and above all to set questions for reflection, with regards to the problems of culture and identities within labour mobility in the above mentioned region.

The mountain regions in the western part of contemporary FYRO Macedonia are among the most famous places with old traditions in terms of movement of groups of people, looking for livelihood and profit, detaching

considerable flows of seasonable/temporary workers (gurbetchii, profiteers) (Христов 2008: 446). The so called *"debarchani"* are itinerant craftsmen (woodcarvers, builders, bakers, confectioners), renowned throughout various parts of the peninsula. Oral legends for transfer and learning about cultural traditions and skills in particular craftsmanship are also numerous, on the territory of modern Bulgaria– it is said that the building masters (called *"djulgeri"*) from the Tran region have learned their skills from "debarchani" (Тодоров 1940: 462). The name is valid for the population from the whole region around Debar, an important cultural and administrative center within the Ottoman Empire where ethnic distinction amongst the various crafts has not been drawn (Светиева 2000: 29).

Within the territory of the Ottoman Empire, the above mentioned region, as well as the regions of Struga, Tetovo, Gostivar and others are inhabited by population with different ethnic and/or religious belonging – Albanian Christians, Albanian Muslims, Turks, Bulgarians, Bulgarian Muslims (torbeshi)[3] etc. (Вайганд 1998; Кънчов 1900). Often Turks or Torbeshes have determined themselves or have been determined as Albanians or Albanians have had Turkish self-consciousness. For instance Kanchov writes: "The whole Goren Debar is threatened by converting into arnaut[4]. Bulgarian–muslim villages, bordering arnaut villages, are already bilingual. The torbeshes consider it honorable to present themselves as arnauts" (Кънчов 1900: 90). The picture in ethnic and religious terms in this part of the peninsula is extremely variegated and dynamic. The population lives in a contact zone, where cultural adoptions were hardly an exception. However, indirect evidence for the presence of Albanians in the "profiteer" unions is another name in the historical sources – *"arnauts"*. In this way migrant flows from the Arnaut region have absorbed population with various ethnic and religious belonging.

In the Ottoman period the Albanian population from the mountain regions of contemporary Western Macedonia subsists mainly through sheep-breeding. During the winter, Albanian shepherds migrate with their herds to the Adriatic and Aegean coastal lines. Unlike the Aromanians, who would travel along with their children and household belongings, Albanian families rest north. Many *"ghegs"*[5] subsist as stevedores along the coastal lines and the large cities, such as Thessaloniki. During harvest, others go as season workers in Thessalia, even Pelopones (Вайганд 1998: 57-58). Weigand notes the following for the *Tosks* from Macedonia: "Tosks travel much abroad, same as Aromanis, in order to escape from the poor living conditions in their homeland. Purpose of their travels are Romania (long time ago), afterwards Asia Minor, Constantinople, especially Egypt, and in the last decades they prefer America. Owing to their intelligence and diligence, many of them have accumulated considerable wealth. Publishing a number of Albanian newspapers in Egypt and America proves that the number of Albanian settlers should be considerable, and also that the love towards nationality and mother language is not faded" (Вайганд 1998: 58). In general, during the Ottoman period heading for a gain is a part of the everyday life of considerable part of the Albanian population, and we find Albanian migrants far to the east of the Balkan confines – in Dobrudja, Thrace, in Wallachia and on the territory of current Ukraine (Гюзелев 2004; Муслиу 2001).

Along with the emergence of new countries on the Balkans at the end of XIX and the beginning of XX century, profiteers from the mountain ends of Western Macedonia (regions of Tetovo, Kichevo, Debar) direct their routes more towards Serbia, rather than Bulgaria (Hristov 2007: 267). After the wars the labour migrant groups among the Macedonian Albanians continues to follow these new ways and they settle broadly along the

confines of Yugoslavia, working as confectioners, bakers, boza - producers. (Јовановски 2002: 83).

Traditional annual travels for gain of the men from these regions develop throughout the years specific features of the feast-ritual system and folklore, as the case with the Albanian communities from Western Macedonia is. The most important family-kin feasts usually group in certain period of the year, mainly when seasonal workers return home; weddings are also performed in the period, when those departed "for gain" return; family and kinship structures transform, social roles change (Hristov 2007: 267; Христов 2008: 449-451). A specific gurbet ritual complex is created, related to seeing off and welcoming of the gurbet people. Unfortunately these aspects of the Albanian population of Western Macedonia remain extremely under-researched and are still waiting for its scholars.

In spite of the lack of research though, it is clear that throughout the ages a long-lasting tradition of labour mobility (gurbet/ profiteering) is created in the examined region, and it has become structural for the everyday life of the population (compare Карамихова 2003: 13). This movement flows without cessation years and decades and irrelevant of the changes in directions, duration and character of the gurbet labour, high level of labour mobility is present to this day. *"Every one of our people has gone for gain. Every second one. Successful, or not – everyone has tried"* – this is what the respondents share, and this notion is eloquent for how important gurbet is for the everyday life. In the following parts I will consider contemporary labour migrations of the Albanians, some of their characteristics and aspects, related to the cultural traditions and identity.

In correspondence to the respondents' stories, a huge part of the Albanians continue the tradition of traveling for gain throughout the countries of former Yugoslavia – especially Croatia and Slovenia. A

colleague of mine, ethnologist from Macedonia provided me the following piece of advice: *"If you want to see the Albanian profiteers – go to the bus station, when there is a bus to Ljubljana. Get on the bus – there are only Albanians. For a few hours you can easily interview them. However you can even not ask – just sit there and take notes"*[6].

In relation to the above mentioned policy of workers recruit in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 60s of the XX century, many Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia (then part of Yugoslavia) turn into *"Gastarbeiter"*. Soon the German practice is followed by other Western European countries, and as a result considerable groups of Albanian migrants settle in the neighboring Austria and Switzerland. Today, exactly in these three countries the Albanian migrant are highest in number:*"Ninety percent of our people go to Europe. Germany and Switzerland is the standard. There are Albanians in all European countries. Few go to Italy as there are a lot of Albanians from Albania, not from here. There are a few in Greece too."*

The social networks connecting migrants with each other, as well as with the social networks' members in their home places play an important role in this case (Султанова 2003: 277-278). Migratory networks engage migrants and non-migrants in a set of complex social and interpersonal interrelations (Massey etc. 1993). Once established, these social networks cause and support consequent migrations – this is the well established "chain migration". In this sense, the presence of relatives or simply migrants from the same region, together with their migrant experience, provide the foundation for setting the migrant destination by the subsequent generations. A tendency has been observed for them to concentrate in specific cities of the respective countries, even in specific neighborhoods (Ташева 2004: 27). In the Diaspora established in this way, Albanians create own ethnic

communities and clubs, mosques, schools, where the social and cultural lives of the migrants develop. They have their own cafes, restaurants, food groceries, etc. These help preserving some traditional aspects of the culture and daily life (Џафери 2004: 89-90).

"I had friends there, many friends from these parts of Macedonia… We had our own clubs there, Albanian clubs, there were. Mosques existed for the Muslims, and also there was a Christian church. And a catholic church as well. So every one could visit these places of faith – depending on what faith he professed and appealed to.. So, we had an Albanian mosque there, I was a member of this object, of this mosque. We supported it ourselves as members – we paid 20 marks per month back then for supporting the mosque and the club."

In this way social networks become in their own way a form of social capital, and with its help people decrease the threats and risks in migration, and facilitate access to the labour market, residence, information etc. The migration itself though does not simply depend on networks – it creates networks, and in this way conditions are provided for the migrations not to be unidirectional and limited in time or space (Boyd 1989).

Family kinship ties and relations also play an important role in this context. Family and relatives occupy a significant place in the stories of gurbet people: *"When you are on gurbet, your thoughts are in the motherland. You constantly think of the family – is anyone sick or not. When you have a dream at night – you immediately call – what is happening, is anyone ill? Your brother shall marry – you can't go. I could not attend due to my work; I could not be there for the birth of my firstborn child. There are cases your uncle dies and you cannot see him. My aunt died like this, when I was in Austria and I could not go to her funeral; say to her last farewell*

before she was taken to the graveyard. This is very heavy; it is very heavy to be on gurbet"

Extended family structures continue to exist among the Albanians in Macedonia, where often two or three members of the family go to gurbet. And these who stay rely on their funds: *"You think of your parents. Because they rely on you. Because when you go abroad, you have family and you have to help them. And you constantly think of it – how are they, what are they doing…"*

Family is an important element of the migration experience; it is also an important factor, as we see, in creating the necessity of departure for gain. Exactly family (nuclear or extended) is the structure where help, funds, gifts circulate (compare: Glick Schiller and Furon 2001: 51-60). Therefore, in order to save money, profiteers limit their consumption to minimum. They shop from discounted stores, avoid luxury, public houses, spend money only for the most necessary, save for "settling" the family, or starting up own business in the home place, or educating the children. It is difficult to estimate the exact amount of the funds sent. Very often migrants send the means using informal channels, it is often irregular and vary according to the season and throughout the years. With the help of these means, members of the social networks in the home place are supported (Султанова 2003: 281).

Along with that, the respondents mark as benefit and achievement what is earned, owing to the time spent on gurbet in spite of the severe difficulties and hardships. After 9 years of gurbet in Germany and Austria Imer succeeded in building a small hotel of his own in Skopje and in this way he managed to provide his children with something he's been missing out– education. The funds earned in gurbet raise the living standard, and contribute to certain changes in the cultural model and the view of life in the country of origin of the migrants. New and modern houses have been built

and are still being built in cities and villages, with modern household equipment and techniques.

"I have been throughout the whole Europe. There is no capital in Europe, where I have not been. In America, in Asia; I have not been only in Africa. And I know how the world functions. There are people though, who have not been out of Skopje. And he thinks differently, his habits are different, some thing he just can not understand. He will understand them, however in 20 years time, but then it will be late for him and for the people around him. Only then will he achieve this intellect, but then he would not need it."

It is obvious that besides the cash funds (material transfers), there also exist social transfers – ideas, behavior, new models of consumption and social capital (Levitt 2001). Local cultural traditions and views of life change in the places detaching migrants.

One of the main concerns of the migrants, respondents of mine and also a main subject for the Albanian researchers of Albanian communities in Diaspora, is related to the problem of assimilation and loss of identity (Џафери 2003; Ибрахими 2003). In these cases, those migrants who became emigrants are discussed – in the 70s of the XX century the legislation of some of the European countries provides new opportunities for those who arrived for temporary legal job ("Gastarbeiter"). As a result, many of them bring their families along in the accepting country and settle down there. The second and third generations usually speak little or none Albanian language. I would quote again a respondent's words: *"While I was in Austria, I met people who have arrived year sixty eight, back then. So, I saw them. At first they were alone up to year eighty. Then, in the eighties, they took their women along with them, right. And when I saw their grandchildren – they speak German to each other. They do not speak their*

mother tongue. At school they study in German language, at the kindergarten with the children – also in German. So, you are with them the whole day. And when his father comes home, he is very tire; he does not have time to talk to his child. He would lie and so you will turn on the TV – it is again German language. That is why I had another intention, I went there for a purpose – what do I need to be able to live here, in my city, where I was born, where my father is born, my grandfather. I did not want to take the children there, in order not to lose the way. Because there they perform assimilation. In whatever city, in whatever country, regardless of whether it is Germany or Austria. You are constantly with Germans, Austrians, and you assimilate, and slowly but steadily you lose your mother language. On the second or third generation and so, stop. I came back, because I am an Albanian and I would like to die as an Albanian. I do not want my children to become Austrians".

The process of identity loss and assimilation to which the respondent refers however, is not synonymous and unidirectional. Imer's brother lives for more than 30 years in Austria, his children are born and educated there; he has already lived to see grandchildren. At the present moment, already retired, he spends 15 days each month working at his little brother's hotel in Skopje, while the latter deals with another business in Turkey. The problem is much more complicated and multi-layered and depends on migration and integration policy, on the so called "transnational connections". Migrants construct and change their incorporation in more than one society (Glick Shiller and Basch 1995: 48). Trans-migrants remain engaged to their homeland through their actions and thoughts – continue to send gifts and means within the family-kin circle in the motherland, to cooperate whenever necessary and possible for them (as in the case with Imer and his already retired brother, settled in Austria but regularly returning to Macedonia), to

build and buy large houses at their home places and even return after their retirement in order to spent their last days in the place where they were born (compare Hristov 2008: 120-121).

Along with that, the ongoing flow of new migrants towards the regions already populated with Albanians second and third generation has bidirectional influence. Often clubs and entities in these countries facilitate easier settling and job search of the newcomers. On the other hand the new migrants carry along specific local Albanian culture and rituals. As a result one can observe interest even among second and third generation migrants, towards the cultural heritage of the places their predecessors came from, and from which new people that seek better livelihood continue to arrive– the interest is in dances, songs, rites, traditional food and ethnographic motives in the clothing; folklore formations are set up, traditional food restaurants are opened. Also those who feel deep internal emotional connection to the homeland are all but a few. They participate in the political life of the country, in various civil initiatives for development, both on national and on local level – what Glick-Shiller and George Fouron call "long-distance nationalism" (Glick-Shiller and Fouron 2001: 4).

With the above I would not maintain that there are not migrants whose identity was assimilated or who broke ties with their motherland or that any tension is absent between old and new migrants. It is my purpose to emphasize on the complex and multi-layered problem that cultural heritage and identity in terms of labour mobility and associated processes present. The model that is offered to us for analysis, based on the movements of Albanians from Western Macedonia, has its own specifics and differs from the model of the considerably more researched migration of the population of Albania itself. This constitutes a serious challenge to the scholar but also presents a perspective subject for broader and deeper research.

NOTES:

[1] In order to fill in the shortage of workforce in 1955, the Federal Republic enters upon an agreement for raise of workers from Italy. Agreements follow with Greece and Spain (1960), Turkey (1961), Morocco (1963), Portugal (1964), Tunisia (1965), and Yugoslavia (1968), (Oezcan 1994).

[2] In this case I adhere to the definition of Diaspora in the sense used in the term by St. Vertovec and R. Cohen – as a term indicating all communities originating from territory, different from the one they live in at the moment, and whose economic or political connections cross national borders - Vertovec, Cohen 1999; Vertovec 1997.

[3] In Macedonian historiography Slav speaking population in the referred region is indicated respectively as Macedonians and Macedonian-Muslims/

[4] Old term used mainly from Turks and by extension by European authors during the Ottoman Empire. A derivate of Albanian.

[5] River Shkumbi divides the Albanian population into two main groups, characterized by significant specifics in the language and culture - north of Shkumbi territories are populated with the so called *"ghegs"*, and to the south live the *"tosks"*. These two groups of Albanian population are present also in the region examined of current-day Western Macedonia.

[6] In informal conversation with Vladimir Botsev from the Museum of Macedonia, Skopje.

REFERENCES:

Вайганд, Г. 1998. Етнография на Македония. София, изд. РИВА.

Гюзелев, Б. 2004. Албанци в източните Балкани. София. МЦИМКВ.

Ибрахими, М. 2004. Јазичните и социо-психолошките проблеми на Албанците во диаспората – В: Втор мегународен научен собир „Иселиштвото од Македонија од појањата до денес” – етничко организирање на иселениците. Струга, 20-22 ноември 2003 година. Скопие, 60-67.

Јовановски, П. 2002. Миграциони движења на албанската популација во Република Македонија – Прилози XXXI, 1, 67-85.

Карамихова, М. 2003. Емиграцията от Родопите — нов феномен или временен отговор на кризисните промени – В: Карамихова, М. (съст.) Да живееш там, да се сънуваш тук. Емиграционни процеси в началото на XXI век. София.

Кънчов, В. 1900. Македония. Етнография и статистика. София. БКД.

Муслиу, С. 2001. Албанците во Украйна. – В: Прв мегународен научен собир „Иселиштвото од Македонија от појавата до денес”. Крушево 3-5 август 2000 година. Скопие, 307-317.

Светиева, А. 2000. Миграции – прашања на идентитетот – Етнолог, Год. VI, бр. 9, 25-33.

Султанова, Р. 2003. Транснационализмът като подход при изучаването на постмиграционния опит на мигрантите – В Карамихова, М. (съст.) Да живееш там, да се сънуваш тук. Емиграционни процеси в началото на XXI век. София,

Ташева, М. 2004. Етничката формација и последиците од неа – примерот на Албанците – В: Втор мегународен научен собир „Иселиштвото од Македонија од појањата до денес” – етничко организирање на иселениците. Струга, 20-22 ноември 2003 година. Скопие, 24-29.

Тодоров, Р. 1940. Трънчанинът като строител. – В: Трънски край. София.

Христов, П. 2003. Гурбетчийството/печалбарството в централната част на Балканите като трансграничен обмен – В: Карамихова, М. (съст.) Да живееш там, да се сънуваш тук. Емиграционни процеси в началото на XXI век. София, 223-235.

Христов, П. 2008. Гурбетчийски делници и празници – В: Транзициите во историјата и културата (Прилози от Мегународната научна конференција одржана во Скопие на 30-31 октомври 2006 година во соработка со Етнографскиот институт со музеј при Бугарската академија на науките). Скопие, 445-455.

Цафери, X. 2004. Фактори кои влијаат врз чувањето или губењето на националниот идентитет на иселениците со потекло од Македонија – В: Втор мегународен научен собир „Иселеништвото од Македонија од појањата до денес" – етничко организирање на иселениците. Струга, 20-22 ноември 2003 година. Скопие, 83-93.

Apadurai, A. 1996. Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. University of Minesota Press.

Boyd, M. 1989. Family and Social Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and new agends – International Migration Review, 23 (3), 238-270.

Glick-Schiller, N. and L. Bash 1995. From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration – Anthropological Quaterly, 68 (1), 48-63.

Glick-Schiller, N. and G. Furon 2001. Wake Up Laughing. Long distance nationalism and the search for home. Durham–London, Duke University Press.

Hristov, P. 2007. Migration and Culture – В: Историја, историографија и настава по историја. Скопие, 265-269.

Hristov, P. 2008 . "Wherever I go, I would return home…" Pechalbars' routes on the Balkans – Македонски фолклор, Г. XXXIV, бр. 65, 115-122.

Levitt, P. 2001. The Transnational Villagers. Berkley–Los Angeles–London, University of California press.

Massey, D. etc. 1993. Theories of international Migration. A Review and Upraisal – Population and Development Review, 19 (3), September, 431-466.

Oezcan, V. 2004. Germany: Immigration in Transition – http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?id=235 . Последно посещение: 18. 02. 2009 г.

Vertovec, St. and R. Cohen 1999. Introduction. Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

Vertovec, S. 1997. Three meanings of "Diasporas", Exemplified among Souh Asian Religion – Diaspora, 6, № 3, 277-299.