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Troisième section – LATINITÉ ORIENTALE –

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Kurbet among the Albanians in the Ottoman period. Characteristics and destinations

IVAYLO MARKOV

INTRODUCTION

When speaking of migrations of Albanians during the Ottoman period, one can distinguish different types of movements towards various destinations. However, the movements of people in search of livelihood and better living conditions are the main focus in my paper. They were known in a wide Balkan-Mediterranean areal: the flows of men from mountain regions were directed towards productive lowlands and river valleys (Braudel 1998: 40-43, 51-53). In the Balkan languages, the labour migration of large groups of male populations from their home places to other regions has been known as *gurbet* (Hristov 2004: 48). Among Albanians the word form is *kurbet*. *Gurbet* is a typical male occupation and usually it is seasonal: men leave in spring and return back home in the autumn. They are engaged with different types of economic activities – either agriculture or craft industry (construction, confectionery, pottery etc.). (Palairt 1988: 25-37)

Michael Palairt writes that in the Balkans there were three large regions with concentrations of *gurbet* villages: Central Bulgaria, around Stara Planina and Sredna Gora; Rhodope, especially to the north of Komotini; the area extended from the western borderlands of Bulgaria and adjacent regions of Southeast Serbia, to Kosovo, Macedonia and Pindus (*ibidem*: 23). The last is chiefly the region to which I turn my attention.

Undoubtedly mountain regions in South Albania, Epirus, Thessaly and Macedonia were among the places with the oldest traditions in terms of movements of groups of people, in search of livelihood and profit. In historical sources men who go to *gurbet* from this region are very often



registered as *arnauti*¹ or those who “came from *Arnautluka*” (the Arnaut region). However, these migrant flows coming from the Arnaut region absorbed population from different communities, with various ethnic and religious attachments. As a sizable part of the population, Albanians also participated in these movements.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE *GURBET*

During the early years of Ottoman power in the region, the main occupation in most villages was stock-breeding. A lot of people enjoyed tax concessions, because of their status of guarding mountain passes (*dervenjii*) or of supporting the army (*voinugani*) (Gjuzelev 2004: 8). There were some of the main *jelepkeshan* centres, which satisfied the requirements of the Ottoman army in terms of meat, raw materials, and products. These services for the army of the Empire brought to the local (mainly Christian) villages tax privileges and some local autonomy, offered by the Ottoman government.

The destruction of the agrarian system and the profound social crisis in the Ottoman Empire in the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, caused by the Kardzalii’s unrest and the weakening of the centralized power, led to an increase in free manpower – men who, due to their occupation, knew well the Balkan roads.

At the same time the permanently increasing population in this mountain region and the lack of enough agricultural land, which had to be divided among all male heirs, caused an increase in the number of bachelors. Many families did not have any land. Thus, favourable conditions for labour mobility accumulated. A part of this manpower turned to unspecialized labour, other specialized in different crafts and trading activities.

One of the ways in searching for a livelihood was wage labour during the busy agricultural season – many men worked as mowers, harvesters etc. Others were occupied as domestic servants and farmhands – the so called *argati*, who performed various activities in wealthier houses. Many were porters and stevedores in town, stone-cutters, and brick-makers, or worked in road construction.

There were a great number of craftsmen who came from mountain villages in South Albania, Epirus and Macedonia and offered their abilities or products not only in the nearest town centres but also in more distant destinations. Builders from this region were particularly famous – there were Bulgarians, Wallachians, Albanians, etc., who practiced this craft. European

¹ *Arnauti* is the Turkish name for Albanians. The term refers as well to mercenary soldiers in the Ottoman Empire, who often were of a diverse ethnicity.



travellers wrote about skilled master-builders – Orthodox Albanians who came from Debar, Gjirokastra, Berat and Korça (Muka 2008).

The origin of the new merchant stratum on the Balkans was also connected with the *kurbet*. The expansion of towns in the 16th and 17th centuries subsequently opened new possibilities and occupations for the population the mountain villages. Namely, the availability of raw-material surpluses in stock-breeding and crafts, the men's migratory habits and their intimate knowledge of the difficult routes were the basis of trade growth. Once again the mountain areas in Albania, Epirus and Macedonia are among the typical merchant colonies that despatched more merchants to the Balkans than every other area. Most of these merchants were Wallachians in origin, but there were also many Bulgarians, Greeks, and Albanians. Official documents rarely made a clear distinction between them. Often they were all "Greeks" for the Western European travellers, because the term didn't contain a narrow ethnic significance and only referred to their religious attachment (Gjuzelev 2004: 82-91). In this sense, all Orthodox Christians were "Greeks".

In these historical and structural conditions, the Albanian population was settled in a wide geographical area. Without aspirations for comprehensiveness, I will try to delineate their main destinations.

MAIN DESTINATIONS

- **Italy**

The earliest Albanian settlements abroad concern the two neighbouring countries of Italy and Greece. During the 14th and the 15th centuries mass migrations of Albanians to Greece and Italy took place, as a result of wars and occupation, particularly the Ottoman conquest of the Balkan peninsula. Probably the earliest mass migration in the collective historical memory of Albanians took place in the second half of the 15th century, after the death of Albania's national hero Georg Kastrioti-Skënderbeg in 1467 (Vullnetari 2007). Many Catholics, including close relatives of Kastrioti and others who had participated in the resistance against the Ottoman Turks, fled the country; they settled mainly in Italy, but also in Greece and along the Dalmatian coast (Tirta 1999: 97). The important historic Albanian diaspora, scattered across Southern Italy and Sicily, has its roots in this period. From generation to generation, the descendants of these Albanian migrants, or the "Arbëresh" as they are known, have been able to preserve the Albanian language and traditions through five centuries.



This emigration is considered to have come to an end by the second half of the 18th century. Here I only briefly noted this direction. The history of Arbëresh is a topic for a particular and more comprehensive study. I want to address henceforth the Albanian movements to the east: these are the core of my interest.

- **Dobruja, Wallachia and Ukraine**

The Albanian population is documented during the 15th-16th centuries in several villages in present-day North Bulgaria. These are: Arbanasi, Liaskovec, Gorna Oriahovica, Dolna Oriahovica, in the Tarnovo district; Chervena Voda, in the Ruse district; Arnautkioi, in the Razgrad district (Gjuzelev 2004: 50-67). Some of these villages were mixed in terms of religion, but other (Arbanasi, Chervena Voda and Arnautkioi) were established on an empty plot and originally their population consisted of Orthodox Albanians. Probably they were deported here by Ottoman feudal lords. All villages were a part of *waqfs* and their inhabitants enjoyed the rights of *dervenji*. The biggest bloom of the villages was during the 17th-18th centuries, when they played an important role in the growth of the trade in this part of the Balkan Peninsula. Initially the Albanian traders from the above-mentioned villages kept intermediate trade connections with merchants from Dubrovnik, later on took their place and began an active trade beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire. They opened offices in Wallachia, Transylvania, Moldova, Russia, and Austro-Hungary.

After the 17th century, however, these villages declined, as a result of turbulences, and their participation in revolts against the Empire. The population moved several times to the North of the Danube. Finally Albanians settled in present-day Romania after the series of Russian-Turkish wars in the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Later on, Bulgarians from the surrounding mountain villages settled in the empty villages (*ibidem*: 87-88).

Several villages around Varna and Provadia were populated with Albanians as well. Proof for that are the memories of the Albanians' heirs who moved from these villages in the beginning of the 19th century and settled in present-day Ukraine. After the Russian-Turkish war in 1806-1812, 300 Albanian families left from the villages of Dobrina, Staroselec and Devnya. They established the village Karakurt (today Zhovtnevoe). Till now, this has been the biggest Albanian settlement in the Ukraine. Subsequently migrants from this village moved and established 3



new villages – Gamovka, Georgievka and Devnenskoe (Desnitskaja 1968: 374-375; Musliu – Dauti 1996).

Many Albanians had as destinations Wallachia and Moldova. As I mentioned above, a part of them settled there after they had ran away from villages south of the Danube. Another part were mercenaries in the armies of Wallachian and Moldavian voyvodes. The number of traders of Albanian descent was also sizable. Albanian migration towards Wallachia and Moldova increased during the 18th-19th centuries. At the end of the 19th century, there were around 30,000 Albanians in Romania. The Albanian colony in Bucharest was the most numerous. Albanians worked as street-vendors, specializing in the sale of soft drinks or confectionery items, also as craftsmen and restaurant owners (Giurescu 1966: 168).

Today, elderly respondents from the village of Jelino, in the Tetovo district, keep a vivid memory of their ancestors who, in the end of the 19th, went to Romania on *kurbet*. Here is a short and very curious quotation from an interview:

“Old people told me that in the past our people from the village went mostly in Bucharest. They were occupied with physical work, or different other things that they could do. There were also people who had shops (*dukyan*) there. What was the story – there were many Albanians. And *Bukur eshte* mean “it is beautiful”. And the word and name originate from this *bukur eshte*. Because our people were settled in a great number and had many shops there.”

In the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, cities as Bucharest, Brăila, etc. became important centres supporting the Albanian national Renaissance and fighting for the liberation of many nations that still were under Ottoman authority. The Albanians were not an exception. From the circles of Albanians *kurbečij* in Romania came many figures of the Albanian national Renaissance (Xhaferi – Ibrahim – Yumeri 2004: 62-83).

• **Thrace and Asia Minor**

During the period examined, large groups of Albanian men moved from their home villages towards lands south of Stara Planina. During the 17th century thousands of inhabitants from South Albania, Epirus and Macedonia left every year their villages and went to Thrace, and mostly to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul. Some reached more distant destinations in Asia Minor (Gjuzelev 2004: 99-100). They came as workers



in time of harvest and threshing, or as masons, they worked in lumber-mills, became field-keepers or bodyguards (Bobev – Kacori 1998: 206).

One of the first relevant written pieces of information was left by the Frenchman Pierre Belon, who in the middle of the 16th century mentioned that in the villages in East Thrace there were numerous workers from different parts of the Balkans, and among them – many Albanians:

“When we continued our route through the fields towards Istanbul, I met big groups of poor Albanian peasants, in other words – farmhands, who went back from Turkey (where they had been to work) to their home land... These poor Albanian peasants leave in groups their home land, which is not productive, and they go abroad. In order to gain money during summer they go to Turkey and reap corn fields... And when they come back they live the whole winter with the money they gained in summer” (Belon de Man 1953: 183).

At the end of the 16th century, Jean Forezien reported about other groups of Albanians, which consisted of 500 men. He also wrote that they were harvesters. The meeting happened on the road to Istanbul, between the present towns Harmanli and Svilendrad (Cvetkova 1975: 100-101). In the 17th century, while passing by the town of Chorlu, an anonymous French traveller mentioned the “great number of Albanians who went to Anadola” (*ibidem*: 168). In a *cadi*'s document from the town of Izmit, dated in the same period, it is written about the Albanian lumbermen who delivered timber to the sultan's shipyards. In the middle of the 19th century, the Austrian diplomat and Albanian explorer Johan Georg von Hann estimated the number of Albanian workers in Istanbul and its vicinities at 6,000 people. He depicted the organization of the Albanian builders:

“They are masons or carpenters, especially those of the villages of Kolonja and Dibra (Debar). Such crafts have been familiar to all the inhabitants of these regions. Those who built the walls of European Turkey and the Kingdom of Greece, cutting wood or sawing boards, all of them are from Albania. These craftsmen work and travel together under the leadership of an old master and carry their materials on mules, horses, and donkeys [...] They come back [home] on Saint George's feast and leave around Saint Dmitry's feast. The craftsmen possibly work at the same place or at least the same area. A group of masons consists of 20 persons. The group moves under the guidance of an older master [...]” (Hahn 1954: 43)

Along with the seasonal movements began the process of Albanian settlement in some sparsely inhabited villages in East and West Thrace,



as well as in the bigger imperial economical centres – the capital Istanbul, Alexandria, Cairo, and so on. Such settlers – Orthodox Albanians – settled in the village of Mandritsa, Ivaylovgrad district. Nowadays it is the only village in the Republic of Bulgaria where the older villagers preserve the memory of their ancestors' settlement on this land, as well as some elements of their traditional culture and archaic Albanian dialect. There is a local legend about the village creation, dated in the first half of the 17th century. It evokes the settlement of three brothers who came from North Epirus, from the village of Vitkukja. Similarly to other Albanian villages in the East Balkans, people from this village worked in stock-breeding and trading animal raw materials and products. They supplied the Ottoman garrison in Edirne with cattle, cheese, and butter (Gjuzelev 2004: 100; Bejleri 2008).

In the Ottoman registers of the 17th century we can find 8 villages placed on both banks of the Maritsa River whose names contain the name "Arnaut". However, at the end of the 19th century neither of them was populated with Albanians. Some of the older villages from the Mandritsa preserved the memory of relations with Albanians from other villages in Thrace, which at present are part of the Republic of Turkey – Altintash, Ibrik Tepe, Sultankioi, Pazardere, Abalar, Zalof (Desnitskaja 1968: 373; Gjuzelev 2004: 100-101).

The Balkan wars were the reason for the decline of many villages in Thrace, among which were these Albanian villages. A great number of their inhabitants were killed. East Thrace became part of Turkey after its victory over Greece in the war of 1920-1922. As a result, the Greek inhabitants of East Thrace were forced to leave it. Along with the Greeks, the rest of the Orthodox population was deported, and among them were also many Bulgarians, Gagauz, and Albanians.

In general, the birth of the new national countries in the Balkans at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century would establish new political boundaries in the peninsula. It would influence the directions and destinations of the *gurbet* movements, but their characteristics and distinctions would persist. In the last paragraph I briefly describe some of them.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS

The traditional model of labour mobility changed the entire socio-cultural environment over several decades, due to the men's temporary absence from the villages. It was connected with a number of specific features of the feast-ritual system and folklore in the birth places that provided workers.



In the course of time a stable ritual complex had been established. Seeing off and welcoming the migrant were very important in this respect. In the past among Albanians in the Tetovo region, for instance, the seeing off happened as follows: on the eve of departure, his relatives gathered for dinner; on the day of departure some protective actions were to be accomplished: a glass of water was poured out before him and a wish was made, so that “the work would go as the water flows”; the man had to cross the doorstep with his right leg. Often his wife or mother gave him something from their home – an amulet to protect him, a coin, in order not to go empty-handed and to come back with more money, or a towel, so that he doesn’t forget his home and comes back, etc.

The relatives followed the man beyond the outskirts of the village, to a place that traditionally marked the borders of the region. From here he continued his road to a closer or a more distant destination. These places of separation had different names, but they are known in a wide area in the South Balkans. For instance, in the Zagoria region (nowadays – on the Greek-Albanian border) the following toponyms related to the departure on *kurbet* are recorded: *Guri Shkemileve*, near to the villages of Sheper and Nivan (district of Girokastro, Albania) – a small porous limestone rock, covered with small holes interpreted as having been produced by the tears shed by mothers seeing off migrants (Pistrich 2008: 202). In the Western part of the Republic of Macedonia similar toponyms have been known among Albanians, as well as Macedonians, Vlachs, etc.: *Dardha e lotëve* near the village of Dobovjani (Struga Municipality), *Plachi krusha* among the Macedonian population, which means “pear tree of crying”, or *Ura e lotëve* near the village of Zhelino (Municipality of Tetovo), known as *Plachi most*, “Bridge of crying” (Kushkoski 1998: 11; Hristov 2009: 94).

The mass absence of the *kurbetçij* men from their homes, for most of the year, led to changes in all the chief rituals in the life cycle. The most important family-kin feasts were usually achieved as a group, in a certain period of the year, mainly when seasonal workers returned home. Weddings were also accomplished in the period when those who departed on *kurbet* returned. For that reason most children were born in a specific period of the year. Family and kinship structures transformed, social roles and relations changed (Hristov 2008: 222-223).

The men’s absence led to a prolonging of the complex cycle of the numerous family-kin households. The migrant man’s wife and children remained in his father’s home, along with the sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law who did not leave home. Such complex households could send more men on *kurbet* and, at the same time, there would be enough



male members in the home to take care of the house, agriculture and stock-breeding. Men on *kurbet* spent money only for their basic needs. The saved money they sent back home to their relatives. It was used for buying land, building houses, and so on.

In the sphere of folklore the *kurbet* also had its influence. The establishment of *kurbet* practices led to the appearance of specific folklore patterns, such as *këngët e kurbetit* (*gurbet* songs). The topics of these songs define the most important moments linked to the *kurbet*. They are broadly divided into several groups. The first one contains the reasons for the *kurbet*, the departure, the mother's and the beloved one's anguish. The second group represents songs about life away from the homeland, the hard work, longing for home and the family. In the third group there are songs about the hard life of the family of the man who is away on *kurbet*, while raising the children in his absence. The song about the returning home from *kurbet* and the family's happiness is part of the last group. This may also comprise the story of his bad luck in not gaining enough money or his death away from home (Konstantinov 1964: 54-70; Xhagoli 2004: 122-125).

CONCLUSIONS

Five centuries under Ottoman rule, which ended with the declaration of independence of Albania in 1912, were accompanied by different types of migration to even more destinations. Reasons for these migrations were varied and complex, but they mainly fall into two broad categories: those characterised by an element of coercion (forced migrations) and those characterised by a search for work and better living conditions (labour migrations or *gurbet*). However, this distinction becomes blurred when one considers the conditions of extreme poverty, exploitation and misery in which many Albanians, especially peasants, lived in their areas of origin.

The *kurbet* model of the Albanians is an important part of the phenomena that is known as "Balkan *gurbet*". During the years a steady and complex ritual was established and the entire local community that sent off migrants changed. Moreover, many of the *kurbet* characteristics and practices remain vital even today among the populations of the region.



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