Identity Formation and Dilemma of Two Cultures – The Case of Albanian Circular Migrants Living Between Albania and Greece

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Abstract
The study of migration and cultural change has occupied an important place in contemporary research as part of social change. There is a number of studies concerning migrants' integration and identity formation of migrants in host society. In context of Albanian migration this situation is particularly evident in case of families or individuals who are located sometimes in the country of destination and sometimes in the country of origin (case of seasonal Albanian migrants in Greece), who are characterized by frequent goings and comings. Albanian society has experienced mass migration since 1990. The main destination of migrants from southeast of Albania remains Greece. This paper introduces circular migration between Albania and Greece; the impact of migration in identity formation; social and cultural integration to host society and dilemma of living between two cultures. Localisation of migrants and their families in some cases here and there sometimes makes migrants' identity formation even more difficult and at the same time embodies complex and multi-dimensional meanings of 'home'. Data for this study is provided through in-depth interviews. 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with Albanian migrants working seasonally in Greece legally and illegally. In-depth interviews and individual life stories concerning circular migration allowed to point out social interaction patterns of migrants, dilemma of living between two cultures; the construction of collective and individual identity to the new social and cultural environment. The paper is based on migration statistics, patterns, typologies, migrants' profiles and experiences as well as on their life stories concerning social and cultural interaction to Greece.

Keywords: circular migration, culture, social and cultural integration, identity, cultural values

Introduction
There is a number of studies concerning migrants' integration and identity formation of migrants in the host society. The increasing globalization process, large-scale migration and free movement of population are accompanied by an increasing number of individuals or families living between two countries, who speak more than one language, individuals who
live with the dilemma of being between two cultures. In context of Albanian migration this situation is particularly evident in case of families or individuals who are located sometimes in the country of destination and sometimes in the country of origin (case of seasonal Albanian migrants in Greece), who are characterized by frequent comings and goings.

Albanian society has experienced mass migration since the 90s. The main destination for Albanian migrants is Greece and Italy due to geographical proximity. People from the southeast of Albania migrate mainly to Greece. Since 1820, Greece had been the main source of labor migrants and only in 1990 it became the host country of immigrants. The vast majority of migrants working and living in Greece legally and illegally were Albanians. Hatziprokopiu (2004) states that Greece has been transformed to a host country for migrants (mainly Albanians).

Albanian migration to Greece is characterised by phenomenon of legal and illegal seasonal migration, related mainly to employment in agricultural sector or tourism services. These frequent movements between different social spaces are also facilitated by different factors such as geographical proximity, improved infrastructure and transport opportunities. This results in what Vullnetari (2007) calls the creation of fluid identities. Localisation of migrants and their families in some cases here and there sometimes makes migrants identity formation even more difficult and at the same time embodies complex and multi-dimensional meanings of 'home'. Home signifies not only territorial attachment to a specific place, but its symbolic conceptualization also evokes adherence to transportable cultural ideas, values and traditions (Vomvyla, 2012, p. 2).

The academic debate regarding Albanian migration (internal and international) has focused mainly on economic and social impact of migration; migration as a source of development and emancipation, the role of financial remittances from migrants in improving the livelihood of their families left behind, also economic development of the country, the concentration of new labor force, problems of ruralization of urban spaces, the effort to control migration, the link between internal and international migration, etc. (King R 2004; King R & Vullnetari J 2003; Vullnetari J, 2012). There is an immediate need for scientific studies on the cultural impact of migration, problems of cultural integration of migrants, the coexistence between subcultural groups, living between home and host culture and identity formation issues, etc.

The aim of this paper is to point out the impact of circular migration in identity formation of Albanian migrants to Greece; the degree of migrants integration to host society regarding challenges and difficulties of living between two cultures. This paper also aims to expand opportunities and co-studies regarding analyzes and comparative transnational study approaches (including parallel studies in the Albanian and Greek environment). Comparative studies reflects the interest of sending and receiving society as well, in context of improving and strengthening migration policies for better integration of migrants to the host society.

Identity formation, social and cultural integration to host society and dilemma of living between two cultures remain the main challenges faced by migrants. Living between two cultures and identifying oneself with each of them to a different degree emphasizes what Anim Maalouf (2006) describes as the requirement for reciprocity: “The more you get from the culture of host society the more you can give from yours; the more respect an migrant feels for the culture of his origin, the more open he will be to the culture of the host country” (Maalouf, A. 2006, p. 42). Maalouf (2006) emphasizes that it is dangerous to reduce identity to only one affiliation, which puts people in a partial, intolerant, possessive relationship. Cultural
identity is by no means a given fact once and for all; cultural identity is a changing continuum. Culture carries the past, but it is also the indicator of the transformation and manipulation of acquired features. Enis Sulstarova (2012) shares the same opinion when he argues that identities are not given conclusively by biology and history, but they are constructed by the actors themselves depending on the social circumstances they are located.

**Research methodology**

Data for this study is provided through in-depth interviews. 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with Albanian migrants working seasonally in Greece legally and illegally. Determining the number of interviews was conducted in accordance with the principle of sufficiency, the principle that characterizes qualitative studies, which implies the inclusion in the survey of interviewers, as far as the 'filling' of data is reached. This paper is part of a wider study on integration patterns of migrants to the new social and cultural environment, as well as the impact of migratory experience in creating sub-cultural diversity in a society. Selection of the interviewees was done through the 'snowball' method and reasonable sampling. Special care was taken to interviewees selection in order to present a variety of migratory experiences and a diversity of their representation in terms of gender, age.

In-depth interviews at individual and family level enabled better understanding of the complexity and dynamics of the migratory experiences of migrants as well as challenges that accompanied their social and cultural integration. Also in-depth interviews and individual life stories concerning circular migration allowed to point out social interaction patterns of migrants, dilemma of living between two cultures; the construction of collective and individual identity to the host society etc.

**Identity formation: theoretical approaches**

To understand the challenges of identity formation in context of transnationalism it is better needed to refer to 'identity meaning'. Identity is defined as the meaning individuals create for themselves based on social categories given and expectations associated with these categories (Algan, Bisin, Manning & Verdier, 2012, p. 9). Expectations determine which behavior is considered appropriate for individuals from different social categories and in different social situations. In context of migrants facing a new social and cultural environment which differs from that of the country of origin, identity formation is closely related to the degree of their cultural integration in the host society. Akerlof & Kranton (2000) emphasize two dimensions of identity formation process and cultural integration of migrants:

- Social categories and expectations are acquired and learned through identifying the individual with another who share the same categories, belong to the same cultural group
- Cultural identity is not given, so individuals choose tasks towards social categories through actions belonging to these categorizations.

An important indicator in identity formation of migrants is the degree of their social interaction with host society. Social interaction itself is related to factors such as group size, economic benefits that come from these interactions, and so on. Often, migrants face large cultural differences to host society and they have to choose between two alternatives: to identify with the host society and culture or to identify with their own culture. Each identity represents a set of expectations or actions associated with it. An important issue is what Algan et al (2012) call ‘the creation of oppositional cultures’, when migrants share categories and
expectations that conflict with those of the dominant culture. If opposition cultures are created there are two consequences; social exclusion and lack of economic opportunities, which in turn lead to the creation of oppositional cultures (2012, p. 10). So there is a two-way relationship between the degree of migrant identification with one’s own culture / new culture and social inclusion or exclusion.

Identification is a process of naming, of placing ourselves in socially constructed categories (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 2005, p. 288) and it depends on factors related to individual expectations, opportunities offered by social environment, the extent of social interaction, etc.

Migrants identity formation dilemma to the new social and cultural environment is not the same for all migrants, but it differs in terms of religious or ethnocentric affiliation as well. Gilles de Rapper (2005) in his study “Better than muslims, not as good as greeks- Emigration as experienced and imagined by the Albanian Chrisitians of Lunxhëri” highlights the migration strategies of people from the southeastern part of Albania to Greece, focusing on sense of belonging and identity of migrants and their families both in Albania and in Greece. According to this study, Albanian migration to Greece affects, not only identity formation of the migrants to host society, but also affects the construction of collective (and individual) identity in the society of origin: that is to say are also affected by migration in the way they perceive themselves.

Based on De Rapper’s study local society, especially in the southern and southeastern part of Albania, is visibly organized in terms of religious affiliations (De Rapper, 2005, p. 178). These categories related to religious and ethno-national identity, such as ‘Orthodox’, ‘Northern Epirotes’ – become central in the way migrants themselves perceive their migratory experience, and which influence some of their decisions, mainly during pre-migratory phase (decision making to emigrate). 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.

Other factors that influence identity formation and sense of belonging of migrants to the new social and cultural environment are related to the ongoing ties that migrants maintain with the community of origin through frequent visits, contacts with family members/relatives, exchange of gifts/photos, preservation of elements of material culture, etc. Migratory experiences of Albanians in Greece are so complex and represent such a wide variety of life and family histories that stand between efforts and strategies to identify with the host society and culture on one side and efforts to preserve one’s own cultural identity on the other side. Eleni Vomvyla (2012) in her study “Constructing Identity and Heritage at the Crossroads: Albanian Families’ Cross-Border Connections and Homemaking Projects in Athens” captures Albanian families’ identity building and heritage encounters at the meeting points of new and old homelands, Greece and Albania respectively. The article treats the processes involved in the families’ literal and metaphorical connections with the ‘old country’, manifested in cross-border links, everyday routines and material cultures, are integral to their homebuilding projects in their new locale. In the context of Albanian families’ here and there trajectories, the old homeland is memorialized and re-enacted in demonstrating ethnic identity through displaying material culture and practices of (i) naming children after heroes of Albanian mythology; (ii) claiming Albanian origins in performances and discourses of the everyday; and
methods and ways of communication in Albanian. In migration literature ethnic language is considered among the key cultural tools employed in displacement to remember ‘home’ away from home.

In constructing identity and preserving heritage, parents and grandparents became mediators to introduce young people to aspects of ethnic culture. Older family members in Greece and Albania communicate the Greek-born offsprings meanings attached to values, objects, habits and rituals (Vomvyla, 2012, p. 15).

**Albanian circular migration**

Albanian migration has been of high intensity, especially in the south and southeast part of the country. Greece remains the main destination for Albanian migrants from the southern and southeastern Albania (IOM, 2007; King R, & Skeldon R, 2010; Vullnetari J, 2012). Albanian migration is largely irregular, especially in its first and second phase. Due to irregular nature of mass Albanian migration to Greece (mainly during 1990-1997) there is a lack of accurate data on the number of Albanian migrants. Different sources provide different quantitative data. In 1997 Greece counted 40 irregular Albanian migrants for every one legal migrant (Volunteer J, 2007, p. 40). Data from the International Organization of Migration (IOM, 2007) show that in 2003 in Greece there were 34,882 illegal migrants, while this number is thought to be larger.

The back and forth movements which characterize Albanian migration are closely related to irregular migration. A large number of Albanian migrants to Greece have been repatriated by Greek authorities due to lack of legal documents. Some of them have had such an experience several times (this is facilitated by the geographical proximity to Greece). This fact points out a typical feature of Albanian migration; circular migration. This includes temporary or seasonal migration, mainly in context of Albanians migrating to Greece, which is mainly related to work in agriculture and seasonal tourist industry. Data from the Greek Ministry of Interior show that more than 40,000 permits for seasonal and temporary employment were granted to Albanians during 2007-2009, namely 13,416 in 2007; 13,732 in 2008 and 13,697 in 2009. These represented more than 90 % of all such permits granted by Greece in these years (Vullnetari J, 2012, p. 85).

A more detailed information about number of seasonal work visas issued by the respective prefectures by year of presentation is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2- Number of applications for seasonal work visas of Albanians in the Prefecture of Imathia and Pella in Greece**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications for seasonal work visas</td>
<td>19374</td>
<td>34975</td>
<td>20894</td>
<td>15364</td>
<td>14930</td>
<td>15010</td>
<td>13683</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Marouki, Th & Gemi, E (2013) introduces several types of circular migration between Albania and Greece:
- **Legal seasonal migration** which includes Albanian migrants working seasonally in Greece under the system of foreign worker invitation, returning to Greece every year usually at the beginning of May, and stay until October/November (12 of the interviewees belong to this type)

- **Irregular seasonal migration** which involves young Albanians arriving irregularly in Greece for seasonal work in the fields (there is no long-term plan behind their irregular movements between Albania and Greece)

(4 of the interviewees belong to this type)

- Legal circular migration of low- to semi-skilled workers which involves migrants working in the construction sector usually stay in Albania from December to February/March, working until July in Greece, possibly with a break during Easter, then return to Albania in August, and finally come to work in Greece between September and November (14 of the interviewees belong to this type)

These back-and-forth movements of Albanians to Greece involving semi-skilled, low-skilled, or unskilled migrants have allowed them to earn a living for many years and sustain their family back home; to work on the family farm or run a business of their own in Albania; to adapt their work around the demands of family life, and possible periods of unemployment in either country.

**Living between two cultures- challenges of integration**

The interviewees shared their experience of integrating to Greek society, noting a number of factors and influences, which have served as integration or exclusion mechanisms. Based on the type of migration (legal / illegal), their life stories present two typologies of migratory experience in terms of the difficulties and challenges they have faced:

- Migrants who migrated illegally emphasize the problems that accompanied their arrival in Greece and difficulties to get employed and make the life until receiving proper documents.
- Legal migrants emphasize the difficulties in getting a residence permit, orientation in the new social environment, difficulties in communication, cultural differences between home and host society etc.

The interviewees point out some characteristics of Greek culture and society related to different aspects of their lifestyle.

E. L 35 years old, seasonal migrant in Athens (works as an electrician) who goes and comes several times a year to Greece depending on the job offer, while his family wife and daughter live in Korça city says:

"**Migration has taught me what is best for the family, in terms of communication and relationship within family. I have seen that children in Greek families have the freedom to tell their parents everything, to inform them, and in this way, parents also have the opportunity to help, advise, be close to them in case of a problem. Communication between partners also affects a lot. Spouses make decisions together, communicate and discuss everything. This affects children as well, because they see how parents communicate about everything and learn to do the same thing as they do"**.
Language practice is another indicator of migrants’ integration to host society. Migrants’ language skills have improved over time facilitating their social and cultural integration. Among the most important factors that affect this are; time of stay in Greece, type of work performed by migrants, the degree of social interaction with host society etc.

Social interaction between individuals with different cultural backgrounds, significantly affects the modification or change of behaviors, attitudes, practices, certain aspects of lifestyle in general. Cultural change can be very rapid when it comes to superficial components of the cultural system such as symbols, consumption, practices, but when it comes to cultural values change is very slow. The cultural components gained later in life are more variable, while system of national cultural values changes very little or not at all and this change takes a long time (Hofstede G, Hofstede J.G & Minkov, M. 2010, p. 20). Based on the interviews it is evident that Albanian migrants are integrated to Greek society. They communicate easily in Greek language, interact with host society, enjoy listening to Greek music, have acquired practices and habits which make them similar to the social environment they live. These are more evident when they return homeland and bring these new practices gained from coexistence with Greek society. Among different habits and skills Albanian migrants have gained to host society and apply after returning homeland is the use of new techniques for cultivating agricultural products; building houses; decorating houses; hygiene; communication and relationship within family. But when it comes to mentality and cultural values the change is less significant. Cultural values related to marital and family relations, intergenerational relations, attitudes toward sexuality etc., which reflect Albanian cultural identity are preserved among Albanian migrants in Greece and also are reinforced after their return homeland. This is mostly evident among migrants from rural part of Albania. Migration to Greece and interacting with host society affects migrants’ integration to dominant culture but returning homeland on the other hand confronts them with local mentality.

“When we are in Greece we try to behave like Greeks, to adapt to their lifestyle; when we return from migration we behave and think like Albanians. I live in the village with my family and my parents. Although I try to learn a little from living in Greece, the rural mentality of mine and my family still remains strong” [K. T, 47 years, circular migrant to Katerini working in agricultural sector].

Despite that, long stay in the Greece and efforts to social and cultural integration have affected modification of many cultural values among Albanian migrants. These are more evident among young Albanian migrants in terms of improving the family and social status of women and gender relations.

Conclusion

Based on interviews and life stories it is important to highlight that despite facing a number of difficulties and challenges Albanians migrants in Greece have achieved a dynamic economic and social integration to host society. The temporal and spatial dimension plays a significant role in their integration to the host society. After a long experience of staying and working in Greece they have managed to organize successfully their living, adapt to the local society in terms of employment, housing, interpersonal relations, social exchanges, etc.

Migration trajectories and migratory experiences of the interviewees show that migrants' social networks have been very useful and have served as a very strong support for Albanian migrants in Greece, especially at the beginning of migration project. Albanian migrants have
managed to improve their living conditions and status during their stay in Greece. Labor market trajectories for many migrants prove to be relatively successful. Legal migrants also enjoy almost equal access to benefits and services. Legal status and migration policies play an important role in terms of opportunities for inclusion in the labor market, gaining rights related to access to health care, etc.

Summarizing the above it is worth noting that:

First, there are no uniform patterns of 'migrants' integration'.

Second, migrants' background and characteristics are very different and this is reflected in a variety of integration forms and degrees at the individual or family level.

Third, migration patterns and dynamics are also important and relate mainly to migration project, type of migration, the exclusionary or integration mechanisms conditioned by host society.

Fourth, time remains particularly an important factor in this context. Duration of stay in Greece affects the degree of economic, social and cultural integration of migrants; the gradual improvement of their language skills; sense of identifying with the host society; consolidation of social networks; gradual modification of cultural values and features coming near to dominant culture etc.

Migration has led to an increase in cultural diversity and complexity of many societies. Migration is not something new, but it is now happening in a new context. Large-scale movement and migratory experiences allow migrants to bring with them their own culture, creating societies of cultural and subcultural diversity. In this context it is needed to understand identity as a multiple affiliation. The increase of individuality and the possibility to choose between a wide range of identities has given more opportunities to the individual to realize himself and to discover a self that is not artificially imposed by tradition, culture, etc.

Integration is not just a matter of time or function of material and social capital, but also a matter of personal resources and individual characteristics: readiness, feelings, mutual perceptions, etc. The way individuals or groups perceive each other affects the extent to which they interact.

The impact of migration experience to Greece in home society is mainly evident in terms of financial and social remittances which have served as source of livelihood and survival for their family during their stay in country of destination, as well as creating a social group which is characterized by cultural features gained by coexistence with the host society. The study showed that cultural influences from the migration experience are mainly related to aspects such as: language influences, communication and behavior patterns, influences on family relationships, etc. Besides that circular migrants' frequent round-trip movements often confront them with different cultural patterns which complicates the process of cultural identity formation. Based on these findings it is important for further researches concerning migration studies to focus on identifying cultural values of home society which hinder better cultural integration of migrants to host society.

References


