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"THE CHAMS? WHO ARE THE CHAMS?"

The discourse of Chameria among Albanian migrants and the indigenous Albanians in the Northern Greece

Matvey Lomonosov

Whatever anthropological approach we use, the assumption of belonging to some territory becomes visible and serves to entail ethnic identity. K. Geertz argued that the humans in general attribute an overwhelming power to innate human "givens" such as blood ties, language, territory, and cultural differences (*The Interpretation of Culture*. New York, 1973). On the other hand the appropriation of shared history, that inevitably takes geographic dimensions, functions as an origin myth and helps to depict the ethnic group as an extended kin group (Eriksen Th. *Small Places – Large Issues. An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London, 2001. 264.). That is understandable the ethnic geography, as well as the whole geography, can be not only real, but imaginary. Mental division of an area to own territory and alien territory forms an ethnic boundary in the same way as it has occurred in the late 18th century, when the imagination of the Eastern Europe imposed the rank of the Europeans as the civilized and barbarian ones (Woolf L. *Inventing Eastern Europe*. Stanford, 1994).

At the past northern areas of Greece, called Chameria in Albanian, which are in the center of our attention, were the integral parts of Albanian cultural space. In the late 18th and early 19th century prominent Albanian ruler Ali Pasha Tepelen, whose zealous political activity reflected on Albanian epic, asserted the power over half-independent Pashalic of Yanina. One of the most reputed Albanian revivalists Naim Frasheri graduated from Ioannina. Till the end of the Second World

War the region was populated by Albanian minority, flowed here in the 13th century and self-identified as "Chams" by the name of the river Thiamis (Θύαμις in Greek, Çam in Albanian). In 1944–45 the Muslim Chams, suspected in collaboration with the fascists, were expelled by EDES (National Republican Greek League) troops¹.

¹ Vickers M. The Cham issue: Albanian national and property claims in Greece. L., 2002. P. 5-7. URL: <http://www.da.mod>.

From the geographical point of view Chameria is seen dubiously. In narrow sense it corresponds to the Greek provinces of Tesprotia, Preveza and Ioannina, located in the north-western Epirus, on the Coast of Aeonian Sea. The southern part of Saranda district forms Albanian component of Chameria. The villages of the Chams are situated at the delta of the river Thiamis and in the mountain area on the south. Filiates, Paramitia, Mazarakia, Igoumenitsa (in Greece), Konispol and Markat (in Albania) are the old centers of Chameria. After the fall of communist regime in Albania “Chams’ issue”, which deals with property claims and historical rights of Albanians for Chameria, started to extend increasingly. The region became to be considered as all Albanian lands of the Northern Greece with the center in Ioannina.

From 1992 onwards “Chams’ issue” was discussed time by time on the high level², undermining the efforts of international community to establish security on the Western Balkans and disrupting bilateral negotiations in various fields. In early 1991 the patriotic society “Chameria”, which emblem contains the head of “Albanian hero” Pyrrhus of Epirus, was founded in Tirana. Its activists composed respective maps, where Chameria is depicted as a part of ethnic Albania. In the same way the site “Voce of Chameria” was created with propagandistic purposes³. Each year the society organizes “March of the Chams”. In 2004 on the basis of “Chameria” Albanian political Party of justice and integration was established. Albanian academic community contributed to the matter, publishing a wide amount of works and documents on the past of Chameria, creating the cultural society “Chameria”⁴ and the Institute of Cham studies⁵. The protagonists of the Chams incline to present Chameria as original Albanian territory and thus in their imagination the boundary between Albania and Greece shifts to the far south.

The notable fact is that the expulsions of 1944–45 did not touch the Orthodox Chams. By this reason not exclusively Albanian nationalists, but many of renown albanologists also see indigenous Albano-Greek (Greek-Albanian) bilinguals of Northern Greece as Albanian minority⁶. Greek academic and popular tradition insist on these Albanian-speaking citizens should be called “the Arvanitas”, who correspond to Greek-identifying group of Albanian origin, living in Southern Greece. A number of researches suggest the majority of these Orthodox Chams self-identifies as “Shqiptar”, which means Albanians. In contrast to the “genuine” Arvanitas, they have retained both distinct ethnic and Albanian national identity⁷.

uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/balkan/G109; Historia e Shqipërisë. V.III.Tiranë, 2007. F. 505.

² См.: Berisha: Çamëria, mes fqinjëve ka gjithnjë probleme // Parajsa Shqiptare. URL: http://lajme.parajsa.com/Politike/id_87379/ Sali Berisha is the current prime-minister of Albania.

³ Zeri i Çamërisë. Shoqëria Politike Atdhetare “Çamëria”. URL: <http://shoqatamera.blogspot.com/>

⁴ Krahu i shqiponjës: Revistë politike, kulturore, letrare the shoqërore. URL: <http://krahuishqiponjes.blogspot.com/>

⁵ Institute of Cham Studies. URL: <http://www.cameriainstitute.org/>

⁶ Десницкая А.В. Албанский язык и его диалекты. Ленинград, 1968. С. 365 - 366; Иванова Ю.В. Указ. соч. С. 83, 299; Народы зарубежной Европы. Т. 1. М.. 1964. С. 515; Vickers M. Op. cit. P. 7.

⁷ Banfi E. Minorités linguistiques en Grèce: Langues cachées, idéologie nationale, religion. Paris, 2006. P. 27.



Old Mosque in Konitsa



Orthodox Church in Kastri

Matvey Lomonosov

Pochází z Permu. V současné době studuje v doktorském studijním programu na Středoevropské univerzitě v Budapešti. Věnuje se otázkám národní mytologie.

Following the anthropological approach, we ought to compare the image of Chameria, created by politicians and researchers, and the perception of this Greek area (its history and population) by “Albanian” inhabitants, including as well Orthodox Chams as migrants. Such aim caused an expedition, which lasted from the 4th to the 7th August 2009 and covered such centers of Chameria as Ioannina, Igoumenitsa, Filiathes. During our fieldwork we included in this list the village Kastri that locates 10 kilometers away from Igoumenitsa.

Albanian presence is slight in researched areas, whereas it appears evidently in ethnic Albanian territories of Serbia, Macedonia or Montenegro. No inscription has been found, no Albanian has sounded. Only migrants are named the Albanians by local population.

Nine informants were interviewed, out of whom six are migrants. Another four informants will be called conventionally “Chams”, as they are named in albanological literature.

No.1. A builder from Ioannina. 29 years old. Born in Albanian Fier. Four years ago he came with his friend to Greece and now visits his native town a few times a year.

No.2. A builder from Ioannina. 26 years old. Born in Fier of Albania. Four years ago he came to Greece to work and now visits his native town few times a year.

No.3. A builder from Filiathes. 43 years old. Born in Saranda. He works in Greece for 15 years and every weekend goes to Albania to meet his family.

No.4. A trader of textile from Filiathes. 50 years old. Born in Elbasan. He works in Greece for 20 years and goes to Albania to visit his parents.

No.5. A farm laborer from Kastri. 60 years old. Born in Lushnja. He lives in Greece with his family for more than 15 years.

No.6. A pensioner from Filiathes. 76 years old. Born in Filiathes. She has a poor proficiency of Cham dialect of Albanian.

No.7. An owner of a café in the village of Kastri. 74 years old. Born in Kastri. She can speak Cham dialect of Albanian as fluently as Greek.

No.8. A pensioner from Kastri. 86 years old. Born in Kastri. He speaks fluently in both Cham and Greek.

No.9. A pensioner from Kastri. 79 years old. Born in Kastri. He has the same level of Cham dialect as Greek.



Filiathes (Alb. Fillati)

Interviewing was been conducted in the form of an open dialogue. We were focused on the identity of our informants, and their general comprehension of the history of the Albanians in Northern Greece (Chameria), investigating on the contemporary presence of the Chams in those areas.

Ioannina

We succeed in taking interview from two informants (No.1 and No.2). According to their opinion “There are almost no Chams” or “Maybe there are just a few”. Another comment was “the majority of the Chams were expelled by Greek army in 1945”. And those, who remained, are present now in Filiathes and “have no rights”. Another informant claimed the Chams are not like them. They are “more discreet and conservative, and not very clever”. The informants agree the claim of Albanian prime-minister Sali Berisha: «Town of Filiathes belongs to us historically». Apart from the history of expulsion, which they learnt at school, newspapers, TV programs and movies, they could not tell us anything else concerning the history of Chameria. Surprisingly sounded, when the informants characterized the hero of Albanian epic Ali Pasha Tapelen as “bandit” and “dictator”, whereas the period of his power as “a bad era of Albanian history”.

Filiathes

Although the informant No.3 “has close relationship” with local Albanians, he is sure there are no Chams in Filiathes, only 100–200 working migrants. “All of the Chams were expelled by Greek army in 1945”. (This information he received from mass media, because “there were not lessons on Chameria at school”). Besides the migrants the Arvanitas speak Albanian in Northern Greece. “But they are the Greeks”. No.3 said we can meet the Arvanitas in the village of Kastri.

The informant No.5 knows only the Chams “were expelled in 1944, therefore no Cham has remained here”. “The Arvanitas are the Greeks, who know Albanian language, living with the Albanians for a long time”. “Some of them can be encountered in Filiathes, the others in nearby villages of Igoumenitsa”.

Informant No.6 told us he was of Greek origin and could speak Albanian, having Albanian neighbors. Though he spoke Cham dialect of Albanian, he introduced us to his friends, who communicated in modern Albanian.



Old House in Kastri

Kastri

At first sight the village does not differ from the other visited areas. However, the some slight differences can be noticed. In local cafes Albanian speech sounds, because the old generation speaks Cham dialect quite well, even if prefers Greek. The conversation between old villagers and migrants can be conducted both in Albanian and Greek. Children speak only Greek. Albanian identification is applied only for the migrants.

The informant No.7 said: «When Albania has been opened the Albanians gathered together and came here. They were not born here. There are the Albanians, who came here, but go home time to time”. The informant No.5 spoke about the life of the Albanians: «There are plenty of the Albanians here. They live with their families, work, and earn good money, about 35 E a day. No Albanian stays here from the Second World War”. He hesitates to tell us about the Chams: «We have nothing in common with the Chams. It is the problem of government. We live here very well, have all necessary documents, job and our families».

The informant No.7 has very floating identity. Being interviewed she generally called herself Greek. But for the question “Had the Chams ever lived in her village?” she responded with a confidence: “We are the Chams!” A little later she asked one passerby in Albanian:

- Do we belong to the Chams?
- No, the Chams are from Albanian lands, - was his answer.
- Oh, then I guess I don't belong to the Chams - said an old lady.

Although in the end of our conversation she told us again she was Cham.

The informant was puzzled when we requested her to tell us anything about the history of Kastri village. She could not say anything clear. She only knew that in the past there was less Albanian population in the area: "Before there were fewer Albanians than now. They had arrived after Albania had been opened. Fifty years ago none of them lived here. Though there were the Turks. I don't remember when the Turks had left because at that time I was too young".

The informant speaks Cham dialect of Albanian perfectly. "Our children also speak Albanian, - this was one of her last comments, - If we speak to them in Albanian, they know how to respond in Albanian"

The informant No.8 told us about common life of the Chams and the Greeks before the Second World War: "Seventy years ago the relations were good. They lived and worked with us here, fraternally". When the matter was to identify the previous population the informant lost his train of thought: "They were not the Albanians, but Muslim Greeks. Those Muslims knew as well Albanian as Greek". Then he called them the Turks. Eventually the informant concluded: "They were the Greeks. As now there are the Greeks in Albania, but they are not the Greeks, but the Albanians. The countries were separated. These have become the Greeks, whereas those have become the Albanians". As regards this the conclusion can be drawn that the pensioner did not distinguish national (or state) and ethnic identity. He spoke with irritation about the period of the Second World War and told us about

war crimes, committed by the Albanians: "The Albanians came together with the Italians, killing us. Then they came with the Germans. 11 persons were executed here, 49 ones in Paramythia".

The friend of the previous respondent the informant No.9 explained that they knew Albanian "from our fathers". "Our ancestors were the Greeks, but they lived together with the Albanians. It was before the Second World War began". These informants generally do not identify themselves as the Arvanitas: "The Arvanitas are those, the Albanians". Only migrants are called by them the Albanians.

Conclusion

During our fieldwork-research no sign of Albanian identity among the Albanian-speaking bilinguals of Northern Greece has been detected. They prefer to speak Greek, calling themselves Greeks and persistently distinguishing themselves from the Albanians. The bilinguals see the Albanian history of Chameria negatively. The Albanian migrants feel no affinity to the local "Chams" and call them Greeks. Apart from the information received from newspapers and TV programs they know a little about the history of Chameria. Neither "Illyrian king" Pyrrhus, nor Ali Pasha Tepelen, nor Naim Frasheri became the symbols of Albanian presence in Northern Greece.

All attempts of nationalistic oriented elites who actively propagandize Albanian historical right for Chameria are ineffective. Nowadays imaginary Albanian-Greek boundary corresponds to the state border. That is why the reaction of a young Albanian girl from Konitsa, who married the Greek and left Leskovik 4 years ago, does not seem accidental.

- Tell us what do you know about the history of Chameria and the Chams?

- Chameria?.. The Chams? Who are the Chams?

ABSTRACT

Chameria is the region in the Northern Greece that was inhabited by Albanian ethnic minority after the Second World War. It is often considered as the part of so-called Ethnic Albania side by side with Kosovo, Preševo valley (in Serbia), South Montenegro and Western Macedonia. Nationalistic politicians, journalists and historians create many myths of Chameria. The expedition of graduated students of Perm State and Sankt-Petersburg State Universities was organized in the main centers of historic Chameria in August 2009. The strictly Greek ethnic and national identity of Albanian-Greek bilingual population was fixed. Albanian migrants in Greece consider the region as alien land. These facts contradict the discourse of Chameria not only in political texts, but also in academic Albanological ones.

► Chameria, Chams, Arvanites, ethnic Albania, political myth, flexible identity, border area