



Vassilis Nitsiakos

# On the Border

Transborder Mobility,  
Ethnic Groups and Boundaries  
on the Albanian-Greek Frontier

LIT



Vassilis Nitsiakos

On the Border

28.7.2012  
To Maxim  
just to remember  
his days. :)  
Konitsa  
Vassilis



# Balkan Border Crossings

Contributions to Balkan Ethnography

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Monograph I

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Ethnic Groups and Boundaries  
along the Albanian-Greek Frontier



ΔΗΜΟΣΙΑ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ
ΚΟΝΙΤΣΑΣ
ΑΡ. ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗΣ 53345
ΗΜΕΡ. ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗΣ
ΤΑΞΙΝ. ΑΡΙΘΜ. 3048 ΝΙΤ

κωδ. εγχ: 7568

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LIT

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-643-10793-0

**A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library**

©LIT VERLAG Dr. W. Hopf Berlin 2010

Fresnostr. 2 D-48159 Münster

Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-620 320 Fax +49 (0) 2 51-922 60 99

e-Mail: [lit@lit-verlag.de](mailto:lit@lit-verlag.de) <http://www.lit-verlag.de>

**Distribution:**

In Germany: LIT Verlag Fresnostr. 2, D-48159 Münster

Tel. +49 (0) 2 51-620 32 22, Fax +49 (0) 2 51-922 60 99, e-Mail: [vertrieb@lit-verlag.de](mailto:vertrieb@lit-verlag.de)

In Austria: Medienlogistik Pichler-ÖBZ, e-mail: [mlo@medien-logistik.at](mailto:mlo@medien-logistik.at)

In Switzerland: B + M Buch- und Medienvertrieb, e-mail: [order@buch-medien.ch](mailto:order@buch-medien.ch)

In the UK: Global Book Marketing, e-mail: [mo@centralbooks.com](mailto:mo@centralbooks.com)

In North America by:



**Transaction Publishers**  
New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.)

Transaction Publishers  
Rutgers University  
35 Berrue Circle  
Piscataway, NJ 08854

Phone: +1 (732) 445 - 2280  
Fax: + 1 (732) 445 - 3138  
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To my friends  
of the *Border Crossings* Network





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## PROLOGUE

When I visited the region of the Greek minority of Albania for the first time, immediately after the collapse of the communist regime, in the beginning of 1991, it dawned on me that an immense research challenge was opening ahead. So I immediately started thinking about what I could do on a systematic basis.

The first opportunity appeared only in 1994, when a research partnership was proposed to me by the University of Patras. This concerned a small research project titled "The wider dimensions of the demographic problem of the Greek minority of Albania", which we carried out together with colleague C. Kassimis and which resulted, among other things, in a publication with the characteristic title "The Greek minority of Albania: transition or catastrophe?"

During the period that followed, I participated in a research mission whose object was the recording of folk songs in the same area. In the meantime, I had had other opportunities to visit South Albania and become directly or indirectly preoccupied with it and reflect on all I would observe there.



A few years later, in 2000, one more opportunity was offered to me, to participate in a rather large research project assigned to the Universities of Ioannina and Patras by the ministry of agriculture. The project was titled "The effects on the Greek country-side, of the settlement and employment there of foreign labour", and lasted two years. My personal charge was to investigate how immigration was experienced by the immigrants themselves, so I took hundreds of interviews, mainly from Albanians. Thirteen of those interviews were published in my book, *Testimonies of Albanian Immigrants*, in 2003.

My acquaintance with all those people incited an interest in discovering their places of origin. Questions of collective identities, ethnic relationships and the management of symbolic boundaries by the people were emerging all the more as interesting objects of study. So we submitted, in the framework of the project "Pythagoras II", a proposal for a research project titled "Immigration, borders, cultural identities and ethnic groups in the Greek-Albanian frontier", which was approved in 2005. This project, in the context of which an ethnographic documentary film titled "The Border" was also produced, gave me the opportunity to carry out field research on the other side of the border as well, during which I conceived the idea of writing the present book. My research continued, therefore, even after the completion of the specific project and lasted effectively until the completion of the writing of the book, in November 2008.

The book is based on my research diary, which I composed in a more detailed and analytical manner than usual, because my desire was that the ensuing book would follow the structure and writing of the diary, in terms of both style and organisation. What I did, therefore, was copy out my diary, elaborating fur-



ther on my initial commentary and reflections, analysing further those points where I thought it was necessary to do so, involving theoretical issues and documenting the final ethnographic text with the necessary notes and bibliographical references. In the book, I make use of a small number of itineraries, which function rather as stimuli for bringing up issues and presenting views that had developed throughout the previous period. It goes without saying that the scientific research on which all this depends is in no way confined to the time limits of the particular project, that is, the dates recorded in the diary, which latter, nevertheless, effectively provided the starting point of the whole venture. Moreover, references to other research projects and previous ethnographic endeavours are frequent. I should also mention that I was so very interested in conveying the atmosphere of the diary and the vitality of spontaneous writing, that I mostly kept the chronological order of the ethnographic missions and to a large degree the style of the first writing.

Even though the stylistic features of the writing are rather self-evident, I still believe it is worth accounting for them further. First, the diary mode explains the presence of dimensions such as the oral idiom and spontaneity, elements that encourage references to emotional responses. During the second writing, I reduced or modified such references in a few cases, where I felt that the discourse tended to be inappropriately personal for the genre of ethnographic narrative. Second, self-reflexivity constitutes part of the writing; the subjectivity of response to many of the phenomena I describe is expressed both explicitly and implicitly. Third, the balance, between, on the one hand, the subjectivity of experience and, on the other hand, the desire for the final product of the writing and its assertions over particular



matters of scientific interest to be effectively coherent and documented, was a basic concern of the venture. Fourth, one of the basic strategic choices of the writing was to render myself a narrator who, in parallel with my own perspective, would display other views, as well; apart, that is, from those expressed by the groups or individuals under study. So, I tried to include in my approaches other voices, too, keeping for myself a role similar to a coordinator of a choir, which I wanted to be polyphonic. This effort explains the frequent presence of large passages from other writers' texts that belong to different kinds of writing. Finally, the inclusion of some of my own, previous texts was decided, for the purpose of displaying the genealogy of several of my views and ideas and this also fits the frame of self-reflexivity, to some degree.

This book owes a lot to many people. Above all, it owes its existence to its protagonists. To all those people who found themselves close to the particular border and were subjected to its effects. The text may contain certain references to particular cases, but the book is about the whole of the frontier populations, which, despite their differentiations, share something in common: the border itself. Regarding references to persons, I did not follow the usual ethnographic practice of using pseudonyms, except in very few cases where I thought it ethically necessary. Apart from my own preference for this practice (for reasons of convincing documentation and historical reference), my informants or interlocutors themselves assured me they have no problem whatsoever with being personally named. I am grateful to all these people and anxious to know their views on what I have written, the responsibility of which, of course, is all mine.



From among my colleagues, I owe more than a simple “thank you” to my collaborator Kostas Mantzos, whom I frequently mention in the book anyway. Kostas shared with me not only part of the field research experience but virtually the whole of my thoughts on the issues I raise. Our endless discussions, either on location or outside it, helped me a lot in my understanding of things and his always apt remarks have always been a source of inspiration for me. Kostas also drew the maps and offered a meticulous commentary on my manuscript.

I also owe thanks to my colleagues Vassilis Dalkavoukis, Yiannis Manos and Marilena Papahristoforou, who have read and discussed a previous version of the text, Athina Peglidou, who worked with me during the research, Charalambos Kassimis, for various pertinent collaborations and discussions and Evgenia Sifaki for the initial translation of the text. I also thank my friend Giorgos Chiras, who accompanied me several times in Albania and helped with his sociability. The Ph.D. students and post-graduate students Yiannis Drinis, Fereniki Vatavali, Thodoris Kouros, Vassilis Raptis, Georgia Kitsaki, Christina Daflou, Velta Daljanaj and all the others who have contributed to my work somehow, I thank them all.

In Albania, there are many people who helped me one way or other. Eno Koço, Vasil Tole, Gerda Dalipaj, Armanda Hysa are among the colleagues who have revealed to me, in their special way each, ways to unlock “secret” doors of Albanian identities. Certain individuals made my life easier on site, contributing, at the same time, to my effort to “see behind walls”. I warmly thank Apostol Tase and his wife Melpo, Leonidha Poçi, Niko Mihali, Hristo Gjergj and Foti Çico.

I left for the end Voula and Vasso, without whose love, support and interest this book would not have materialised.



## INTRODUCTION



### *Migration and transnationalism*

Migration, during the recent decades, has taken on new features, which demand a renegotiation of the theoretical as well as the methodological premises for its study. Globalisation and the conditions of post-modernity have formed, after all, a new framework that re-contextualises and re-configures the phenomenon of migration.

P. Kivisto, in his important article "Theorizing transnational immigration: A critical review of current efforts" (Kivisto 2001), attempts a critical assessment of the ways this term has been used as a theoretical tool for the interpretation of the new migrational identities and communities, an assessment that could be used as starting point for fresh reflection.

As the writer of the above article notes, the term transnationalism was first presented systematically, as a novel analytical tool for studying and interpreting contemporary migration, in the collective volume *Towards a transnational perspective on*



*migration*, edited by Glick Schiller, Basch and Santon Blanc (1992). The same authors, two years later, published another book, entitled *Nations Unbound* (1994), where they developed further the "transnationalist" conceptual model with respect to contemporary migration. In general terms, they argue that, contrary to previous forms of migration, where there appears a total breakdown of social relations and cultural ties between migrants and their countries of origin, together with a parallel tendency of assimilation by the host country, in the new migration the migrants' networks of social relations, their activities and patterns of life involve, on the whole, both host and home societies: a social field is being formed which links up the two countries irrespectively of borders and geographical conditions, while the new migrants live thus in between and form rather "hybrid" identities. The process, therefore, through which migrants build these networks between the two countries is called *transnationalism* and the migrants who build them are called *transmigrants* (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992:1; Kivisto 2001: 552).

A detailed presentation of Kivisto's critical analysis is outside the scope of this work. Especially interesting for us, though, is the discussion on the issue of these migrants' identity. The supporters of the theory of *transnationalism* point to the multiple and fluid character of the new migrants' identities and perceive a resistance, on their part, to the conditions of globalisation, in the context of their identity management. This is questioned by Kivisto, who, citing other scholars as well, claims that these new migrants mostly seek their incorporation into the system rather than resist it.

Also, according to Kivisto, many of the features of the new migration are not new at all; for example, the strategies of re-



turn, circulatory and seasonal migration (Kivisto 2001: 555-556). What has really changed is not the phenomena themselves but their extent and frequency. Today, new communication technologies and the improvement of transport systems have rendered migrant movement and activity between the two countries-poles of migration easier, so that the frequency of contacts and visits has increased in such a way as to enable the configuration of a transnational social field.

This position is also supported by the well known researcher of the phenomenon of migration Al. Portes, in two articles, the introductory and concluding ones of the special issue of the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies* that is devoted to the concept of *transnationalism*. Portes argues that while migrant movements from country to country have always taken place, recently they have acquired a massive and composite character, enabling us to talk about the construction of a social field, configured, in effect, by an increasing number of migrants who have two homes, speak two languages and live a life between two countries, whose borders they frequently cross (Portes Al., Guarnizo L.E., Landolt P., 1999:217-237). The closer these countries are geographically, the more intense the phenomenon.

It is obvious that such is the case with the Albanian migrants to Greece and especially the ones who have settled in Epirus, a subject that will concern us presently. The formation of transnational social fields that cut across national borders is a phenomenon that characterises the very relation of the two countries, Greece and Albania, with multiple consequences for both the migrants and the local populations of the two countries. Of significance, with regard to the further elaboration of the transnationalist conceptual model, is the contribution of an-



other scholar, Th. Faist, who, in his book, *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*, provides a much more developed version. He includes in the definition of the social field, or rather space, the circulation of ideas, symbols and elements of material culture. More specifically, he writes: "Space here does not only refer to physical features, but also to larger opportunity structures, the social life and the subjective images, values, and meanings that the specific and limited place represents to migrants. Space is thus different from place in that it encompasses or spans various territorial locations. It includes two or more places. Space has a special meaning that extends beyond simple territoriality; only with concrete social or symbolic ties does it gain meaning for potential migrants" (Faist 2000:45-6).

I contend that the symbolic dimension of this field that intersects, together with geographical borders, the boundaries of national wholes, is of great consequence to the construction of new identities: new identities that force us to re-define the terms we customarily use to approach national identities, because of their hybrid features and more. The case of Albanian migration to Greece may offer a lot to the study of this phenomenon, provided this study is based on a pertinent interdisciplinary approach. The geographical proximity; the historical background of the population movements; the multi-ethnic makeup of the wider geographical area that encompasses the national ground of the two nation-states, which were shaped mostly in the end of the Balkan wars; the existence of ethnic groups that cut across national borders (i.e. Vlachs); the presence of a recognised Greek minority in Albania and other matters that concern the bilateral relations of the particular states



(for example, the problem of the Çams), all render the phenomenon of the new Albanian migration enticing to the sciences that study migrational phenomena in the world today. Moreover, the very complexity of the phenomenon may prove a good example for the case against over-generalising and simplifying theoretical models.

It is worth staying with this matter, to point out, in brief, the significance of the dimensions mentioned above, of Albanian migration to Greece. There is, first of all, the historical dimension. Is it possible to ignore the fact of the large population movements of Albanians toward areas that are Greek today that took place before the period of Ottoman domination, and led to the presence of Arvanites in Attica and elsewhere? These people are bilingual still now, to a certain extent. This question is pertinent to our understanding of the historical background of migration and, furthermore, it concerns aspects of the contemporary phenomenon, since it appears that the presence of these populations in Greece has affected both the configuration of the map of the new migration and the networks of social relations that have emerged recently. Linguistic community and cultural intimacy have played and still play a role in the search of a place of settlement and line of work on the part of migrants, but, also, in their reception and incorporation by the communities of local Arvanites. I have had the opportunity to substantiate this fact through many interviews with Albanian migrants, whose report of their good reception by the populations of Arvanite villages tends to be uniform, especially around the area of Thebes during the first months of their ventures in Greece. The fact that the elderly, at least, speak Arvanite and can communicate with Albanians is of crucial importance. As to the question of cultural



intimacy, the matter is more complex and demands special research and study. It was brought up at the Korçe conference by S. Mangliveras, who, with his paper on "Albanian immigrants and Arvanite hosts: Identities and relationships" (Mangliveras 2004; also Derhemi 2003), demonstrated its complexity and great significance for the understanding of the very concepts of ethnic and cultural identity. It is very interesting, indeed, to examine the way such bonds are activated in the context of migration, but, also, the way the subjects themselves confer meaning to it. After all, the very definition of such a bond is problematic, in the sense that it is essentially ethnic, since it concerns the common ethnic origins of the two groups, while now their members belong to different national wholes, being Greek or Albanian. The formation of modern, "pure" national identities and the ideology of nationalism generate a difficulty in the classification of this bond, as is the case with any kind of identification, which, on top of any other social and psychological consequences it may have, may produce an identity crisis as well. The apparently contradictory attitude of the Arvanites, which Mangliveras discerns, has to do with their difficulty of dealing with this phenomenon in public. Public manifestation of ethnic and linguistic affinity with Albanian immigrants is definitely a problem for the Arvanites, which is why they behave differently in public and in private. For them, the transition from pre-modern ethnic to modern national identity involved, historically, their identification with the Greek nation, a fact that causes bewilderment whenever one wants to talk to them about the activation of ethnic bonds. From this perspective, too, the particular issue is provocative.



With respect to the ethnic history of the wider geographical area where the two nation-states were created, and especially the wider zone where the national border was demarcated (with great difficulty, it is true, due precisely to the composite ethnic mosaic), one can ignore neither the existence of different ethnic groups nor the interpenetration of the two dominant ones, which finally constituted the two nation-states. The example of the Vlachs, a group whose presence persists in both countries even after the demarcation of the national border, is characteristic. Several of the nomadic Vlachs, who move seasonally with their large flocks, just happened to be on one or the other side of the border with their flocks at the time and that chance fact determined their national alignment. In several cases, parts of a kinship group were divided in two and their members became citizens of different nation-states.

When the Albanian regime collapsed, the Vlachs of Albania were of the first to come to Greece, because they were acquainted with the passageways close to the border and because they belonged to family networks, which made their residence and working in Greece easier. I met several such cases during the first years of the exodus (1991-92), in the area of Pogoni and especially in the homogeneously Vlach village Kefalovriso. Here the Vlachs from Albania had relatives whom they sought out and made use of, in the context of individual or family strategies, which they developed subsequently in order to settle in Greece. Many of them stayed initially in this village and then spread out within Greece and especially to areas with Vlach populations (Epirus, Thessaly, Macedonia). It is also worth mentioning that several elderly people with stock breeding experience were occupied in the flocks of the Pindus Vlachs, following



them to their lowland pastures. Common language, common cultural background and, certainly, emotional identification played a crucial role in the formation of permanent networks of collaboration and the smooth incorporation of the immigrants from Albania into the Vlach villages of Greece. The issue of the migration of Albanian Vlachs to Greece is mentioned by the French anthropologist Gilles de Rapper, who has done intensive field work in South Albania, especially in the area of Lunxhëri, in Gjirokastër, where many Vlachs are settled. In an article about emigration from this area he writes that the Vlachs were the first to depart massively for Greece. This happened because their conditions of living were the worst, having suffered discrimination in the past and being persecuted by the regime, but, also, because they had connections with their own people in Greece, even relatives, as in the village Kefalovriso. Moreover, during the first phase, the Vlachs acted as guides to those who wanted to leave for Greece, because they knew well the passageways in the frontiers and held networks of relations in Greece, which were utilised to advance emigrants to the interior of the country (Gilles de Rapper 2005 and 2003).

To the conclusion of the above article, G. De Rapper gives the title "New transnationalism?" and notes: "Emigration and the opening of the border have brought a change in the local conception of identity: the Albanian-Greek opposition has given way to a more complex 'bricolage' based on memory of the *kurbet* and on a cultural and geographic proximity, and this can be seen as the marker of a new situation of transnationalism between Greece and Albania. This is the way the Lunxhotes respond to the challenge of getting access to the Greek labour market" (p.192). Thus he places the issue in a wider context of



discussion about emigration, borders and identity, emphasising the fact that while national classifications still persist, in order to understand the every day reality of people with respect to the migrants' conduct and strategies, it is necessary to take into account other, more ambiguous and fluid categories, such as ethnic identities. It is not easy, however, he concludes, to determine the extent to which this re-emergence of ethnicity is caused by the configuration of a transnational space due to emigration, where antagonism is expressed in ethnic terms, or whether it is a reaction to the nationalist propaganda of the communist era.

### *Migration or transborder mobility?*

It is already obvious that the concept of *transnationalism*, which occupies a crucial position in the debate on migration in the new context of globalisation, becomes very problematic within the context of Albanian immigration to Greece and especially to Epirus. In the latter case, however, even the the term "immigration" becomes problematic, because it also appears inextricably connected to the concept of the nation, which emerges historically in the context of modernity and in relation to the formation of the nation-state. While the migration of people from one place to another is a phenomenon tied in with the historical presence of man on earth, as an object of study of the social sciences it has been linked, *par excellence*, to the reality of the nation-state; consequently, most scientific approaches to the phenomenon are affected to a great extent by this fact. The assumed identification, within national ideology, of a national territory, a people and a culture has influenced directly or indirectly the



course of the study of the migrational phenomenon, namely the methodological and conceptual choices of the relative studies. Perceiving the attachment of a nation's people to its land in terms of natural rooting meant defining all movement out of the borders of the nation-state as not merely a displacement but an "uprooting". Even though the concept of expatriation used to mean, in the pre-modern past, going away from the place of one's origin, which was usually a local community, with the formation of the nation-state this acquired additional national qualities. More and more, one's "homeland" becomes identified with the country one belongs to and ceases to be identified with the particular place of his origin. After all, the national homeland is considered an extension of the local community, which thus becomes not only part of the former but its miniature. The poem we all learnt at school, about the expatriate who addresses his homeland and asks it for some Greek soil to take along with him to the foreign lands, is typical ("Now that I leave for foreign lands/ and we shall live apart for months and years/ let me take something from you/ blue homeland beloved..."). It is also significant that, while in the Greek folk songs of expatriation the concept of the national homeland does not exist, since this kind of song is a creation of the pre-national era, a time when the community one parted with to "go to foreign lands" was part of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, afterwards, various later approaches projected the modern idea of the nation back onto this phenomenon.

The naturalisation of the relation with what emerges as national homeland in the territorial sense of the word ("homeland") reaches such proportions, that even the natural elements of a place acquire national qualities. The investment of the ideo-



logical construct we call "national soil" with strong emotional content has led national ideology to a kind of true fetishism, which constitutes, nevertheless, the basis of patriotism. Identification with the homeland and its territory means readiness for individual and collective sacrifice in defense of its integrity. Expressions of national rhetoric, such as "I shed my blood for my country" or "we shall defend to the last drop of our blood, even the last inch of our ground" demonstrate the proportion of the phenomenon and its importance in fostering national sentiment.

Of course, the omnipotence of national ideology in the modern period has unavoidably affected the social sciences themselves. The nation did not only function as the dominant political and social factor in the organisation of the world but as the main conceptual tool for the interpretation of reality and, certainly, for the writing of history (Liakos 2005). Indicatively, even scientific schools of thought whose aim is to deconstruct all these "constructs" are frequently trapped by the very conceptual frameworks they intend to question.

Such is the case with the study of the migrational phenomenon. While with the term migration we refer to any form of population relocation from place to place, from an agricultural area to another or an urban centre to another, from city to city, from country to country, etc., its use is associated, as a rule, with the movement from nation-state to nation-state. This is why when we refer to relocations within the borders of a state we have to use the term "internal migration". Even though almost all kinds of relocation, even temporary ones, have been recorded in history as a social problem and are inscribed in the collective consciousness as traumatic experiences, the parting



with the country of origin in particular and the settling in another state is further negatively charged with the ideas of deprivation of a homeland, severing from the national body, uprooting from the land of one's fathers and forced integration with another country and another nation; by definition, the immigrant becomes a national "other", a stranger.

The stereotypes about the unified, homogeneous character of the nation render the process of the immigrant's "integration" a difficult matter, because assimilation is considered a necessary precondition for his incorporation. It isn't by accident, after all, that the first scientific approaches to the phenomenon are focused on this issue. In fact, the assimilation model for the study of immigration starts being queried only just after the 1960s, when new questions are raised, such as the issue of respecting the immigrants' difference, ethnic and cultural, within an ideological and epistemological framework that led, through a "pluralist" approach (the concept of multiculturalism is indicative), to more complex and more consciously political perspectives, mainly regarding immigration to Western Europe. Within this new tendency, which bears the clear marks of Marxist ideology, issues brought forward are the matter of unequal relations between the migrants' host and home countries, in the context of globalisation theory, but also the linking of the ethnic to the class dimension, in the context of the debate over the social inclusion/exclusion of the immigrants.

From the decade of the 1980s onwards we see the emergence of issues that get away from both the ethnocentric approaches of immigrant assimilation and the structuralist ones that underestimate the dimension of the agency of the immi-



grants themselves, emphasising the decisive role of economic and social factors. Indeed, investigations of the relations between different ethnic groups living side by side in the same host country (as is the case, manifestly, in Britain) demonstrated not only the significance of trans-ethnic relations but the importance of identifying the immigrants as social subjects. Not surprisingly, the germs of a revisionist theoretical approach have emerged from this new direction, revising the very category of the nation in more cultural terms. For example, the studies of the national phenomenon by E. Gellner (1983) and A.D. Smith (1991) belong to this perspective.

Generally, from the decade of 1980s onwards, together with the new considerations of the national phenomenon connected with the configuration of a new milieu regarding migration and its consequences for the host countries, but also in the wider context of trans-ethnic relations, a new line of scientific rationales has emerged, from different scientific and geographical areas; these, on the one hand, relocate scholarly interest more towards issues related to the strategies of the migrants themselves, whether on a collective or an individual level, and, on the other, adopt perspectives that promote concepts such as "process" or "construction", in parallel or in opposition to the concept of the "structure". Thus the migrant starts to appear as an active subject and ceases to be merely a victim, while migration starts being dealt with as a multi-dimensional phenomenon and not as a problem or an "anomaly" in need of corrective or therapeutic interventions.

Despite all this, migration continues to be approached through national lenses. The critical approaches to nationalism and the new "constructivist" theories of the nation clearly influ-



enced the discussion on migration and migrant populations, but did not necessarily lead to an epistemological revision of the basic study tools of the phenomenon, or, most importantly, a radical questioning of the structural connection of the national with the migrational phenomenon and a re-adjustment of the conceptual and methodological framework itself (Ventura 1994). This issue is now a matter of urgency, given the generalised spread and intensity of the phenomenon of globalisation and the increase in the mobility of populations, with the ensuing consequence of the multipresence of fluid and hybrid identities. The case of A. Appadurai who has introduced the term *ethnoscapes* is the most characteristic one of this new tendency, which basically leads, directly or indirectly, to the notion of the very "deterritorialisation" of the nation. In other words, Appadurai developed the argument that, with the advancement of globalisation, transnational formations multiply and, as crowds of people and groups cross national borders and configure new landscapes of diaspora, the nation-state increasingly relinquishes its dominant role and people are driven all the more to new forms of collective identification; as a result, their ties with the nation-state of their origin slacken and their identity and culture become gradually "deterritorialised", while in the past the unity of national land, people and culture seemed indissoluble. In the context of the new global ethnoscapes, the flows of human crowds (diasporas, immigrants, refugees, tourists, etc.) form alternative groupings and types of identity, based on fluid relations of internal identification but under similar conditions of mobility and insecurity. These new "communities", contrary to the national ones that are bounded to a fixed territory, are "deterritorialised" (Appadurai 1991 and 1997).



It is understandable why views such as this one do not only provoke deconstructionist perceptions of the nation, but also put to doubt the traditional approaches to migration, which, as we have said, have been dependent on the concept of the nation. Even the concept of transnationalism (and all that goes along with it) reproduces this trend, keeping at the epicentre of discussion the identification between nation and state, an identification which, in its turn, reproduces the isomorphism "one nation-one territory-one culture", consequently confining the nation to the limits of the state, practically regarding the non-identification of the two a deviation and even an "anomaly". The truth is, however, that reality is different to the stereotype the nation has invented for itself and that very often the limits of the nation are not identical with the limits of the state, not only because of the arbitrary demarcation of the borderlines, but because of the migrational relocations that took place during various phases in history (diasporas); as a result, talking about transnational migration produces confusion and, furthermore, it creates methodological impasses. A first and simple question that could be posed is why not use the term "transborder mobility". Something like that could release the discussion from the nation and also introduce the concept of mobility as more appropriate for the new forms of migration in general.

A group of scholars, who study the phenomenon of migration in relation to globalisation, have started a dialogue around the necessity of re-defining the given theoretical and methodological framework, concurrently revising the conceptual tools that have been used up to now. In this context, it is becoming increasingly clearer that transnationalism is not a new phenomenon, but a new approach to the phenomenon of migration.



Indeed, one of the most known scholars, Th. Faist, has suggested that transnationalism is taken as an alternative way of adjustment by immigrants, juxtaposed to those of assimilation and multiculturalism or ethnic pluralism (2000:201). In any case, the more the dialogue moves on, the more scholars become aware of the necessity to transcend the impasses of approaches based on the theoretically and methodologically problematical concept of the nation, as this was defined by the dominant ideology of the nation-state.

The more the omnipotence of the nation-state subsides and the "ethnoscapes" establish their position in the global scene, the more the need grows to abandon the concept of the nation as the basic study tool for migration. The world starts to look more like a whole of landscapes in constant movement and fluidity and less like the sum-total of fixed in space and time, internally homogeneous and totally distinct and different between them nation-states. Thus the very site of the nation, the land, the territory, starts to receive the powerful impact of globalisation, its borders become more porous, so that, gradually, the meanings of both internal cohesion and external differentiation change. Also, alterations in the concept and function of the national border are rendering the movements between states less and less "transnational" and more like movements between different localities within a globalised setting.

Such development is an understandable consequence of the fact that national borders have been transcended on several levels, as in cases of supranational unions, such as the European Union. Due to the weakening, from the inside, of the national borders of the country-members and the free movement between them, "migration" from one country to another has been



transformed into a situation that calls for the revision of the very term. More and more now, movement apparently takes place between different localities in a unified supranational space, while, at the same time, cultural osmoses minimising cultural differences are propagated. Hence moving from one national territory to another feels increasingly less like expatriation, while the host countries become less “foreign”. After all, this kind of mobility has ceased to be considered migration by the countries themselves and is approved as an element of modernisation, a fact that is far remote from the previous dealing with migration as a social problem in the recent European past.

In any case, everything points to the transcendence of the concept of migration, with respect to the study of the phenomena of contemporary mobility, and the necessity of adopting new conceptual tools, which mainly means revising the theoretical and methodological framework. Such revision, of course, has no choice but to focus on the very concept and reality of the nation-state in the era of globalisation (Karagiannis 2006).

### *Methodological issues*

Researching and studying “immigration” in relation to the Albanians who “immigrate” to Greece and concentrating my interest mainly on the Greek-Albanian frontier, I often wonder about the above matters, since the very “data” I have gathered raises questions about the established methodological framework and the very conceptual categories I use in the first place. The choice



of talking about transnationalism in this context is legitimised by the existence of a national border intersected by “immigrant” movements and, of course, by the very consolidation of the two national entities and identities, the Greek and the Albanian, after the formation of the respective nation-states. However, the ethnological reality, as much as the strategies, practices and the very discourse of the “immigrants” themselves often revoke the clear dichotomy between Albanian and Greek. The “immigrants” themselves place these categories under scrutiny by their own practices, in the process of managing: their integration into the host society, their relation with the national group that receives them and their past, as well, matters that are inextricably related. In this context, the concept of border, real and symbolic, acquires primary importance, as we shall see later.

Let's start with the term *Kurbet*, which derives from the Turkish word *gurbet* and means traveling for business. The *kurbet* was used in all the Balkan countries, especially in the years of Ottoman domination but later as well, to indicate the periodic translocations of people to different places for the purpose of work. Among the Albanians it is still used as a term, though it is being gradually replaced by the official terms *emigracion* and *emigrant*, which are commonly used in the media, too. Let's also note that the term *refugjat* is also used, which means refugee and is connected more with the period of the regime, when it had acquired negative connotations (both the fugitive and his family were socially stigmatised). Talking with Albanians in Greece and Albania, I found out that the term *kurbeti* is still used but *emigracion* is considered more modern. In fact, some of my interlocutors told me that all this is “European” stuff, meaning that not only the word derives from Europe, but that the con-



cept is connected with Europeanisation, that is to say, modernisation. The terms *kurbeti* and *kurbetlli* are found in song lyrics, traditional as much as contemporary, but also in literary works and references (Dafa 2003). It is worth mentioning the song that was written for Flamur Pislí, an Albanian immigrant in Greece who was killed by the Albanian police in Elbasan, after a bus hijacking in Greece: here the word *kurbeti* is used repeatedly, as well as the proverb “parja kurbetit është pare e gjaku” (money made in foreign land is blood money) (Papailias 2003); also the name of a polyphonic ensemble of Albanian immigrants in Greece, “Lot kurbetit” (Tear of emigration). So while *emigration* is connected to modernisation, the *kurbet*, distinctly, does not signify merely a different past but the very difference in cultural identity of the various groups that have experienced collectively the phenomenon of this mobility. The differentiation of the two terms, that is, concerns not only the period of time, but cultural identity. Also, the *kurbet* of the past is, distinctly, positively signified in the collective memory of the groups today. Indeed, it often constitutes symbolic capital, employed in the context of the new emigration. Gilles de Rapper observes that migrational experience, the memory of the *kurbet*, occupies an important position in the representations of the past and the self-image of the people of Lunxhëri. Its decisive significance for the formation of their collective identity lies in the fact that the emigrants of the past had given over a great part of their savings for the construction of grand houses in their villages and developed a special way of life and attitude, a sense of superiority in relation to other areas and groups (*aristocraci*). The same scholar stresses, of course, the difference between the *kurbet* of the past and the new emigration: “While the *kurbet* is presented



as a golden age, linked to the economic and social growth of the area as much as to its identity, the new emigration is perceived as a painful and very little productive development. In the first place, narratives of the *kurbet* very rarely mention the practical difficulties of departure and travel, as if borderlines did not exist then (whereas the journey to Istanbul took place via Greece), as if everybody were free to work wherever they wanted. On the contrary, when the talk is about emigration today, the hurdles of departure are always mentioned, whether about the acquisition of a visa, or the traversing of the border, or about the rest of the journey in Greece" (2003:102). If we focus our attention on the Albanians who live and work variously in Greece, we discern a variety of forms of migration, which call for respective differentiations in our manner of approaching them. The presence of Albanians in the Epirus frontier and especially the area of Konitsa bears special characteristics and stands out as a distinct form of "migration" or rather transborder mobility, suitable for testing out an alternative approach and the development of new theoretical and methodological tools for the study of the phenomenon. A simple, superficial effort of locating the Albanian citizens who move and work in this frontier area of Epirus is enough to show their great mobility but, also, how different their individual cases are. To mention the most important categories: families settled in Konitsa or surrounding villages, who visit their home on the other side of the border very often (they keep their houses there and many of them have elderly parents whom they leave behind); families who have settled in Greece but visit their places of origin only occasionally, due to the distance; men or women who work during the week in the area and visit their homes in the weekends; mainly men, who



come for work and return on a daily basis (from the Albanian villages very close to the border); schoolchildren who attend classes in schools in the area, stay in halls of residence or boarding houses in Konitsa and visit their homes on weekends and holidays; elderly people who divide their time between Albania and Greece where their children live; people who work in both countries depending on the season (for example, construction workers who spend their winters in Albania, occupied in various agricultural or construction jobs, while in Greece the demand for such work decreases); and, finally, men and women who are married to Greek citizens and live in the area permanently. So we observe great mobility, but also a differentiation between the various categories, which are fluid themselves, since individual and family strategies change in time, depending on the objective facts of the job market but also each family's cycle of development. On the other hand, given that there is not only geographical proximity but cultural affinity as well, the conditions of Albanians in Greece are nothing like one would expect in a truly foreign land. And this affinity is traced back to the time before the sealing of the border after World War II, when the two sides of the border used to communicate in various ways and the old unity had not broken down, despite the imposition of the national border after the Balkan wars and the foundation of the Albanian state in 1913 (business transactions, social contact, even marriages continued throughout the period between the wars). It extends, and this is important, to the fact that the national border never coincided with the real ethnic and cultural borders between the populations. The ethnic and cultural mosaic of the wider area was so composite, it was impossible to mark down the border in a way that would yield a



clear distinction between Albanians and Greeks. This is exactly why the committees in charge of the border demarcation faced insurmountable obstacles and, in the end, the demarcation was done in an arbitrary way and on the basis of the political power balance in the international scene at the time. The difficulty, as is well known, was not created only by the fact that populations were mixed even within the same areas and villages (i.e. Konitsa and Leskovik), but the fact that the very "objective" distinguishing features of national groups, like language, were not safe indicators, in this case, of national classification and belonging, because, on the level of consciousness, there was a fluidity and in many cases the objective criteria were not identical with the subjective self-definition of the groups or individuals involved. For example, a large part of the Albanian Orthodox population had started to form and even consolidate a Greek national consciousness, through the spread of Greek education and the activity of the Church. On the other hand, the delayed development of an Albanian national consciousness had meant that part of the population had not developed a national consciousness yet, and, as a result, was perplexed at the calls of nationalism for inclusion in one or another group, at a moment when they defined themselves rather in ethnic terms (on the basis of the dominant element of religion, the *millet*) and locally rather than nationally. The example of several Albanian-speaking Muslims in Konitsa is typical and was expressed in the most meaningful way, when, during the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey, after 1923, they had to declare their national identification so that their fortune was decided. In a way, all Muslims were considered Turks and, consequently, were to go to Turkey, but part of the Konitsa Muslims developed a national



consciousness (the brothers Faik and Mehmet Bey Konitza, leading figures of the Albanian national movement are a characteristic example), while some seemed not to have developed a particular national consciousness and defined themselves simply as Muslims from Konitsa, which is why they faced a serious problem when they were called to declare their nationality. Also, it is known and we have mentioned it already, that the Albanian Christian Orthodox had started to develop a Greek national consciousness and were very close, culturally, to the rest of their co-religionists, anyway. It is also important to note that after World War II, especially in the mid-period before the establishment of the communist regime, several Orthodox Albanians and Greeks, too, came and settled willingly in Konitsa and its villages, a phenomenon that continues during the following period, though to a much lesser extent (with fugitives) despite the strict measures of the communist regime in guarding the border. Relevant research we undertook in the registries of the Konitsa municipality confirmed this fact, since the place of descent of all these people is recorded together with a note that they are "registered provisionally [for the purpose of identification]". So we observe the phenomenon that groups of kinfolk and families, too, are divided between the two sides of the national border, with the result of forming in the process different national identities. In Greece, all these people are accepted and inscribed in the collective consciousness as "Vorioepirotēs" (Greeks from Northern Epirus), but they do not all belong to the same ethnic category. They are all Christian and usually of Greek persuasion, but, regarding their ethnic origin, they are differentiated. With the fall of the Albanian regime and the opening of the border, individuals, families and kinfolk, have the



opportunity to reunite and this creates a peculiar situation with respect to "migration". Initially, the networks of these relationships provide assistance to those who wish (and they are the majority) to come to Greece, they accept the help of "their own" people and are generally welcome. For many, and this is the case for Greeks and any others who feel "Greek", the crossing of the border is nothing other than a passage into the "homeland" signifying their re-union with the national body and especially with their own relatives, from whom they had been brutally kept apart for about half a century. Despite the various problems generated by this reunion or encounter, and issues such as inheritance or identity, which provoke tension and disaffection, the fact is that these new "immigrants" are in no way confronted with the usual problems of integration in a foreign country. I mention, as an example, the cases of people who were accommodated by relatives for a long period of time, until they could adjust and stand on their own. Others claimed and acquired houses and other kinds of property they were entitled to, a fact that points to the peculiarity of the situation. Let's also note that, on the other side of the the border, Greek citizens, the so-called "Vorioepirotos" ("Northern Epirotos"), who come from villages or cities of Albania also claim their family houses and property, a process that is rather charged symbolically and emotionally, and in some cases with positive outcome we observe "returns" of property, houses in Albania that are used by Greeks as second residences. This state of affairs reveals how complex the situation is, of the constant moving of people and material goods between the two sides of the border.

Broadly speaking, the new setting is a typical configuration of transnational migration, but this term obscures rather than



illuminates the particular attributes of the real relations and flows that take place in the social field intersecting the national border. The geographical and cultural proximity of the two areas on the two sides of the border, the composite character of ethnic relationships, the historical background of the social and economic relations involved but also of the translocations and relocations from the one area to the other, the fluidity of identities in the past but, to a certain degree, in the present as well, with respect to a large part of Albanian population (mainly the Orthodox Christians), do not allow us to approach the migrational phenomenon in nationalist terms, namely assuming a national purity and homogeneity, which presupposes the existence of national identities, consolidated in time and space and coinciding with the territorial ground of the nation-states. This means that the concept of transnational migration is rather problematic and inadequate for the study of the specific phenomenon and that we have to, on the one hand, transcend the transnational framework that pertains to the existence of nation-states, and attend to the level and the context of ethnic relations, which intersect the national ones; on the other hand, transcending the very concept of migration itself, which is inextricably related to the phenomenon of the nation, we should adopt that of mobility. So, instead of talking about transnational migration, it would be better to talk about transborder mobility.



### *What about the border?*

*First incident:* In August 2006, while teaching a class of ethnographic field-work specialising in frontier areas, we are, together with a group of post-graduate students, at the border guard-station of Proselio, exactly next to the ruined settlement of Korsacka, which is located, literally, on the border. This settlement was destroyed and abandoned in World War II and its Albanian-speaking Muslim inhabitants moved to Albania.

We leave our vehicle outside the station, which was also abandoned a few years ago, with the pretext that it wasn't needed any more, and we follow the path that leads inside the ruins of the settlement to Albanian ground. This well trodden pathway, is apparently used a lot by the Albanians of the villages nearby, who come and go to Greece with great frequency. Personally, I had been there before, had walked on this path and, had, in fact, crossed a stream using a tree trunk that was set there by Albanians as a bridge, thinking this stream was actually the borderline between the two countries, and had moved thus inside Albanian ground, reaching close to the village Radat in Albania. So I urged my students to do the same, so that they see themselves what a border is like. So we went up to the stream and on our way back, as we were going up towards the guard-station, we had a very interesting encounter. Two Albanians on horseback were returning to their village, Radat, from the Greek village Agia Varvara, where they work; they move in and out this way on a daily basis. We start chatting with them. It so happens, in fact, that I know these men from my previous research in the area. To our question where the border is exactly, they smile and meaningfully point behind them: "the border is



on the way of the waters' flow" they say, and I feel not only embarrassment but shame, as well. Embarrassment because, at this particular moment we have violated the border and are standing illegally on Albanian ground; and shame because it's well known that the principle "the border is on the way of the waters' flow" is adopted whenever borders are demarcated. I couldn't, however, imagine that a village is actually located so close to the borderline, literally *on* it. I thought, of course, that this must be the reason why it was abandoned, remembering the proverb I had heard for the first time in the frontier area of Dropull, "field next to river and village next to border will never prosper". I was very happy though, because everything I had told my students about the nature and character of the border was substantiated in the best way.

*Second incident:* On Friday afternoon, springtime 2002, I am in the frontier zone village Molivdoskepastos. The border line is about 500 metres from the village church, at the edge of the settlement. The villagers actually say that when the border was first marked, this church had remained on Albanian ground, because the border had been traced on the stream dividing the church from the village; after the villagers' complaints, however, it was moved and the church was included in the Greek side. Still, several pieces of cultivated land remained on Albanian ground, fields which belonged to people from the Greek village. Indeed, up until WWII, an official agreement between the two states allowed them to cultivate these lands. As we drink and chat with the villagers in a café on the central road, I observe a group of children who look like school children, walking towards the border. I inquire about that and find out that they are children from the nearby Greek-speaking villages of Albania,



Vllahopsilloterrë and Biovizhdë, who study in schools in Konitsa; there they stay in halls of residence and boarding houses during the week and return home in the weekends, via the military station of Molivdoskepastos, which functions unofficially as customs for the people of this area. In addition to the pupils, several people from these villages commute on a daily basis to work in Molivdoskepastos.

*Third incident:* In July 1997 and while in Jannina, I am called on the phone by my parents from my home village, Aetomilitsa, who tell me that Albanians have taken the whole of our flock, about 350 sheep and goats, from their pasture next to the border and led them to Albania. I go to the village, try to console my parents and then I see the Albanian shepherd who worked for my father that summer, coming dressed in rags, weeping and crying that a gang of Albanians beat him up and stole the flock. We start with my father for Plikati, a village between the particular pasture in Grammos and the Albanian border, hoping to find out more. On the way, on the crossroad to Plikati via Pirsoyianni, we meet a police patrol, whose job is to guard the border. We ask them to join us but they refuse, saying that their orders are to guard that particular zone and, if they move further in, nobody can guarantee their safety (this is the time when conditions in Albania are out of control and several Albanian "criminals" enter Greek territory for illegal activities). Of course, no-one, nowhere, can give us relevant information; indeed, the villagers we meet react to our questions with fear, and advise us not to overdo it with our search because these Albanians are ruthless and our very life is in danger. Thankfully, part of the flock returned, the thieves couldn't lead it to Albania (it was a summer afternoon and the animals moved with difficulty, espe-



cially the older and the pregnant ones); so they returned to the pen on their own. The rest were lost forever, having obviously crossed the border.

*Fourth incident:* It is the summer of 1999 and I'm at my home village. Middle of the day, I hear noise and I'm aware of a strange commotion in the village. I try to understand what's going on and observe various Albanians running away towards the mountain or trying to hide in village basements and huts. In a little while, I see the police car in the village square and then some Albanians arrested by the police being led to the police van, to be deported via the customs of Kakavia. This time of year, about 40 Albanians work in the village as shepherds and about as many in construction sites. Most of them haven't got the required documents "the papers"; they are, that is, "illegal immigrants". In a discussion with the village authorities, I confirm what I more or less already know, that there is a silent agreement with the police to tolerate the immigrants, so that "the village is serviced". Every time something like this happens, it means someone has "snitched" for personal reasons, usually revenge against a particular Albanian or even a fellow villager and so the situation is reversed for a few days, at least. The village authorities, however, consider it their duty to renew this silent agreement with the police, even using their connections with high standing politicians. This is, after all, a common secret not only here but on a national scale. Opinions are, of course, divided, according to self-interest, as to whether so many Albanians should be staying illegally in the village, even though the majority is well served by their presence, especially the shepherds and those building houses. There is a contradiction in the villagers' attitude: whenever there is a problem in their rela-



tionship with the Albanians, they immediately assume a negative attitude and racist behaviour towards these people, whom they themselves have invited in the first place, employ and, actually, complain if the police deport them. In any case, the community authorities take on the responsibility for the presence of the Albanians regarding the preservation of security and order in the village. It seems, somehow, that the border is transposed inside the limits of this frontier community, regarding the relocation and presence of Albanians, especially those from the area of Ersekë, behind Grammos.

*Fifth incident:* In the winter of 2000, an elderly man from the village Plikati fell ill and had to be hospitalised for several days in Jannina. His wife had to go along, so a problem emerged regarding the care of their few domestic animals. The solution came from a young Albanian from the village Rehovë, who offered to take the animals to his home on the other side of the border and keep them there until the return of the elderly couple...

*Sixth incident:* A few years after the violent opening of the Albanian border, public opinion in Jannina was preoccupied with a peculiar case of smuggling in the neighbouring country. This phenomenon had been rampant for about a decade and had not been effaced yet (anything, from sheep, goats and other animals, to guns and drugs, was crossing the border in various ways), but the particular case created a strong impression because of the ingenuity involved. It was discovered that from a small village next to the border, where a large family of shepherds reside permanently, large quantities of milk were canalised into Greece via a plastic pipe and sold in the Greek market...



*Seventh incident:* In a transborder meeting at a frontier village in the autumn of 2005, the representative of the Albanian community from the zone of the Greek minority, referring to the conditions that prevail in his village very close to the border, revealed that often Greek machinery is called for and sent by Greek authorities to open the road to their village, whereas no official agreement exists between the two countries for such actions and the Albanian authorities are not even informed. This report aimed at substantiating his opinion about the abandonment of the area he lives in by the Albanian state and he mentioned one more incident that made an impression: The same year, machinery from Greece entered Albanian territory to repair the ruined road leading from the village to the monastery, so that the villagers could go and carry out their religious festival.

*Eighth incident:* I copy from the local magazine *Amarandos*: "As in the rest of the country, in our village, too, the census took place. It is known that the villages have been deserted [...]. This is why they tried to bring in populations from the cities, to present an adequate number of people and gain economic benefits [...]. Personally, I am against the creation of a false image, because this way we miss the point of the matter and do not confront the root of the problem. And, of course, I don't measure everything according to the economic benefits, whereas those in charge of the census in our village fell into that trap. Anxious to assemble more people, they brought in Albanian immigrants as well, legal and illegal, from Konitsa and Albania [...]. The individuals registered in the village were 88, not including the soldiers whose number is secret. The Statistics Department that gave me this information provides no more details about the



nationality of those registered, so we do not know how many Albanians were registered. We do know, however, that we only have one, Ligor (Grigori) Rousta from "Podes"[Podë], who comes periodically, and very rarely his brothers, Yianni and Alfredo come, too. Of the 61 Albanians found in the village, 7 were illegal (further responsibility), they were discovered late in the evening by the police. In other villages, the census of Albanians was attempted, but they were thrown out violently (the incident made news on television) [...] (2001:25-29).

So what is the border? Border anthropology is a rapidly developing discipline, which was practically inaugurated with the, very advanced for its time, work by Fr. Barth, on ethnic groups and boundaries (1969). Barth contends that the construction of ethnic identity depends more on an awareness of difference induced by the boundary, namely the encounter with the "other" and otherness, and less with its cultural content, the common qualities in its interior. This approach essentially set the foundations for further investigation of the concept of the symbolic boundary. Soon after, a series of studies advanced the theory of the boundary within wider contexts. It is worth mentioning a study that opened up new ways for anthropological research on the border. It is the work by Cole and Wolf about the Italian Tyrolo (1974), pertaining to the resilience of cultural boundaries, years after the change of the political borders.

As this sector of studies develops, the scholars' interest concentrates more and more on the relations between the local communities of the border zones and the state, with emphasis on the formation of local cultures and border identities but, also, in relation to the processes whereby broader national entities are formed. Thus the dominant view now is that, generally,



the borders are an area where relations between ethnic groups and nation-states are inscribed, where ethnic, national and local identities are formed and reproduced in time and space, and where dynamic relations between political and symbolic boundaries develop within various social groups.

It is not our aim here to provide a detailed presentation of this debate. We shall confine ourselves to a synoptic, selective presentation of the conclusions of the most important up to date relevant publication, the collective volume *Border identities*, edited by Wilson and Donnan (1998). Defining the border in their introduction, the editors refer to three basic dimensions: First, the juridical one, in the sense that the border divides but also unites states between them, second, the natural one, which concerns the necessity of distinguishing and protecting the border that defines state territory, and, third, the social and cultural dimension, which refers to the configuration of a border zone of variable width that extends to both sides of the border, intersecting it; here populations negotiate variously the relations between them, as well as their collective identities. The last dimension is particularly interesting for us, so we shall return to it. For the time being, we will hold onto one point: that we are talking about, literally, territories, not to be confused with the symbolic borderline zones related to the so-called metaphorical identity boundaries, concepts used in the contemporary discussion about "deterritorialised" identities in conditions of post-modernity.

Cultural units are domains, which may intersect or even undermine the political borders between countries; this depends on several factors and mainly on the attitudes of the states themselves and the nature of the bonds that connect or



divide the groups living around the border. Significantly, all cultures, without exception, are inscribed in space and this inscription may continue to connect inextricably a piece of land with a culture, even if its inhabitants abandon it or some dominant power forces population or other changes. Space often betrays and history, in its own way, resists via the signs in a place. Consequently, the "territoriality" of a culture has to be one of the criteria of approaching border ethnic groups and identities, even in conditions that advance the process of "deterritorialisation" (Wilson and Donnan 1998:1-30).

Two of the studies included in the above volume present special interest for us: Kearney's on the border zone between Mexico and the USA and Driessen's about the passage from North Africa to Spain. Kearney describes how the inhabitants of Oaxaca in Mexico cross the border illegally, led by the vision of a better life on the other side, in the USA; he concentrates his attention on the "slackening" of the national boundary, in the context of the operation of the well-known "push and pull" law of migration, which encourages something like this (albeit illegal), as both countries need it for different but complementary reasons. This, however, undermines not only the boundary, but the very sovereignty of Mexico (Kearney 1998). A similar situation is presented by Driessen, who discusses illegal migration from N. Africa to Spain, which is concurrently a passage from the third world to Europe. Driessen also focuses especially on the concept and image of the border zone, as these are signified and reconfigured during the variable crossings of the boundary. The specific article substantiates completely the view that boundaries operate not only on a juridical and political level, but on the level of meaning production, with respect to identities and



asymmetrical power relations between societies "sending" and "hosting" immigrants (Driessen 1998).

Wilson and Donnan conclude their introduction observing, among other things, that the borders are contradictory cultural and power zones, troubling the double process of bureaucratic centralisation and national homogenisation, precisely because of their extreme cultural variability (1998:26).

From the time the above volume was published till today, much ink has been spilt on the issue of borders, as, with the new developments in the global scene, the subject becomes more and more urgent. In recent years, it has been actually at the forefront of all social sciences, as it also favours interdisciplinary approaches by its very nature. Certainly, issues like the creation of cultural formulations and identities, which cut across political borders, the cultural "production" of space and place, the processes of nation-state formation and its impact on local, peripheral and frontier societies, as well as the political economy of international relations in the era of globalisation, are the special concerns of the political anthropology of the borders.

At the same time, the border as an object of study starts playing an important role in post-modern social theory and cultural studies. Of interest is a tendency within cultural studies, to concentrate attention on the metaphorical dimension of the borders and to critique modernist conceptualisations of space and time, more specifically with respect to the issues of culture and identity. The relocation of interest, moreover, by some scholars, to the issue of identity, has brought the border to the forefront, as an ethnographic site that can contribute to a



broader discussion on the political economy of power relations, regarding the formation of cultural identities in the world today.

The new context within which the concept of the border is being approached is decisively pervaded by the phenomenon of extreme mobility, and, of people, ideas and goods, past and beyond national borders. This, however, does not mean that movement and mobility are uncontrolled. On the contrary, the concept of mobility raises the question of the exclusion from movement, of certain groups or individuals, which is linked to the asymmetrical or unequal relations between states and societies. Thus the border becomes symbolically a "topos" for the exposition of these relations. Also, of interest in this context is an analogous approach by H. Cunnigham and J. McC. Heyman, who propose the idea of a "mobilities-enclosures continuum" for a more clear-cut, empirical study of the border, which would illuminate further the conjunction of power with the management of wealth-producing sources and ideology at an international level. They go as far as to argue that some social groups and peoples are more equal than others with respect to the right to movement. Somehow, the border reveals the inequalities between its two sides and, moreover, it allows for the identification of the procedures through which changes take place, regarding the cultural and ideological meanings with which objects crossing the border are invested. Studying the border also promotes an awareness of a fact several anthropologists have noticed, that it is wrong to perceive places as autonomous entities which first exist and then come to contact and interact between them; so we should examine how places are constructed historically through specific social and political processes. Clearly, such approaches are far removed from the known static



and essentialist views that objectify both the concepts of place and border, while the perspective they advocate upholds the use of theoretical tools such as process and practice in an historical context, concurrently revealing the importance of political economy. This last parameter introduces the dimension of inequality regarding mobility and migration, a matter that leads us to the heart of politics (Cunnigham and Heyman 2004).

### *Case study*

Let's return though to our own ethnographic field. Based on the above theoretical observations and, of course, the broader discussion on this matter, we can make certain claims with respect to the nature and the character of the Albanian-Greek border.

1. The demarcation of the border line, which took place after the Balkan wars, and the creation of the independent Albanian state in 1913 was done in an arbitrary way, vis-à-vis the ethnic and cultural state of affairs. The committees in charge met insurmountable difficulties in recording the national identities of the populations of the wider area, because, with respect to a large part of the population, the ethnic mosaic was composite, the correspondences between objective facts and subjective self-definitions problematic and the identities and consciousness too fluid. It was, in other words, impossible to find a line that would divide these populations into two homogeneous categories, Greek and Albanian.

The problem was not only the ethnically mixed communities and the geographical interpenetration between the various