

History, Identity and Culture of the Borderland Community of Tsamantas in Epirus, North-western Greece

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Before the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the twentieth century, nationality was not of great significance to the people of Epirus; instead, diverse elements — cultural, historical, social and spatial — combined to form the identity of local communities, which differed from each other in terms of religion and language. However, the creation of Albania, and the protracted process of delimiting its border with Greece (1913–1926), brought about differing interpretations of ethnic identity and national consciousness amongst the people of the contested territory. This paper considers how historical events, such as the delimitation of the Greek-Albanian border, can influence local identities and cultures, and how such events help us to understand the social and economic decline of the border community of Tsamantas during most of the twentieth century. It also asserts that the possible future expansion of the European Union to include Albania might diminish differences in ethnicity in the region and facilitate the re-emergence of a distinct Epirote identity and culture.

Introduction

In the early twentieth century most of the region of Epirus¹ was technically an outpost of the Ottoman Empire, though in practice the Ottoman administration had very little involvement in the running of the region. The first Balkan War (1912–1913) brought about an end to Ottoman rule and resulted in the liberation of Epirus by Greece. However, it failed to resolve the problem of the region's ethnically divided, multi-religious and multilingual population. The Greeks and the Albanians, and even the Slavs, all had historical and ethnic claims to the region, and this ultimately led to a series of conflicts, causing considerable human suffering. Furthermore, the dissolution of the old Empire resulted in the emergence of an Albanian state that deprived Greece of territories it expected to own.

¹ Apart from what is now the prefecture of Arta, which had become a part of the Greek state in 1877.

At the Conference of Ambassadors, held in London in December 1912 and attended by the six great European powers, the decision was taken to establish an independent Albania. The great powers then set up a commission in charge of establishing Albania's southern frontier with Greece. The commission was to take into account ethnographical and geographical considerations based on linguistic rather than political factors (Stickney, 1926:34). However, the work of the commission was hampered by issues to do with the multilingual population, and the extreme complexity of the ethnic and religious composition of the wider region of Epirus. The drawing of the border between Greece and the nascent Albanian state thus became a lengthy and disputed affair, subject to extensive international adjudication.

This thorny issue constitutes the main topic of this paper, which will include a profile of the border community of Tsamantas, one of the villages most affected by the dispute, as well as an interpretation of the ethnic identity and national consciousness of its people and those of the wider contested territories. It will also briefly describe the economic marginalisation of Tsamantas, due to mass emigration, and its subsequent decline during most of the twentieth century. Finally, it will consider how the border affects the current situation in the locality, and what the future holds in terms of the possible accession of Albania to the European Union.

The delimitation of the Greek-Albanian border

The commission charged with the task of setting the Greek-Albanian border had to consider opposing rationales of national identity, as postulated by the great powers. The members of the Entente (Great Britain, France and Russia) argued that the main criterion for the border's delimitation should be the presence or absence, in the areas disputed, of a Greek "consciousness" and "civilisation" (that is, Greek education, religion, commercial language and intellectual life), and that on this basis most of the territory of Epirus should be given to Greece. By contrast, the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy) held the common contemporary view that language was the key to nationality, and asserted that this, along with "racial belonging", should be the criterion. Since the language of the majority was Albanian, the Triple Alliance thus contended that most of the disputed territory should be part of Albania (Budina and Hart, 1995:6; Guy, 2008:451).

Eventually, a borderline proposed by Sir Edward Grey, the British Secretary of State and Chair of the Conference of Ambassadors, was accepted by the great powers as a compromise. Grey's border followed the northern edge of the Kalamas River's basin up to the town of Delfinaki, through the Voyusa valley and on to Mount Grammos in the Pindus Mountains to the east. It was left to the delimitation commission to set the exact line of the border, by visiting the area and mapping out the parts that were inhabited mainly by people calling themselves Greek (*Hellenes*) and speaking the Greek language, and those inhabited mainly by Albanian people (*Shqiptar*), speaking one of the dialects of Albanian (*Shqipe*).

There is only limited information regarding the constitution of the boundary commission, and the way in which it operated. However, it is known that it consisted of representatives from each of the six great powers, and that those with a special interest in the delimitation of the border — namely Britain (which headed the commission), Austria, Italy and France — were allowed two members, although the six powers each had one vote only. No representation was granted to any of the countries that would be directly affected by the decision, namely Greece, Albania and Serbia. It was made clear to the commission by the Conference of Ambassadors that “... the delimitation shall be made on ethnographic and geographic bases; for ethnographic determination the maternal tongue of the population shall be determined ... the commission shall not take account of attempts at plebiscite or other political manifestations ...” (Stickney, 1926:34). However, the delimitation process, which began its inspection in October 1913, proved to be controversial and fraught with difficulties. Indignant Greek authors² have pointed out that, during its short visit to southern Albania (which lasted only 58 days), the commission visited no more than six villages, consulted only fourteen individuals, and convened on just twelve occasions.

In early December 1913 the commission left southern Albania for Italy, hoping to finalise the boundary delimitation in Florence. The Greek Prime Minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, protested directly to Sir Edward Grey, fearing that the commission would recommend a boundary that was to the Albanians’ advantage. Grey responded by promising that the Greeks would be compensated for their losses in southern Albania by the granting of the Aegean islands captured from Turkey (Guy, 2008:459–460).

On 17 December, the commission announced that it had completed its work and had accepted the border line proposed by Great Britain (Stickney, 1926:40). This decision, known as the Protocol of Florence, protected the great powers’ interests by setting the border well to the south of the line proposed by Greece (which followed the river Shkumbi in central Albania), thus assigning the area known as Northern Epirus to Albania. From 1914–1919 — a turbulent period not only for Epirus, but also for the whole Balkan peninsula and most of the rest of Europe — the disputed territory of southern Albania was variously occupied by French, Italian and Greek troops, adding to the “confusion and discord” in south-east Europe (Stavrianos, 1958:542).

History and Stories of the Divided Land

The drawing of the international border in 1913 was a matter of paramount importance to the villages caught up in the dispute. One such village was Tsamantas, which had been administered during Ottoman rule by the *kaza* (canton) of Filiates, in turn part of the *vilayet* (province) of Yanina, nowadays known as Ioannina, the capital of Epirus. Tsamantas is situated on the south-western flanks of Mount Mourgana, part of the Illyric Alps and reaching a height of 1,806 metres. In the early twentieth century

² See, for instance, Nouskas (1988:36–37); Krapsitis (1988:26–7); Georgiou (1994:207–210).

the village had a thriving micro-economy based on local mixed subsistence farming, pastoralism, and male migrant labour. It was closely linked, both socially and economically, with fifteen neighbouring villages on the north-western and south-eastern flanks of Mount Mourgana (Figure 1), and together they considered themselves one community, sharing the mountain's grazing land. Tsamantas, being the largest of them, was acknowledged as the "head village".

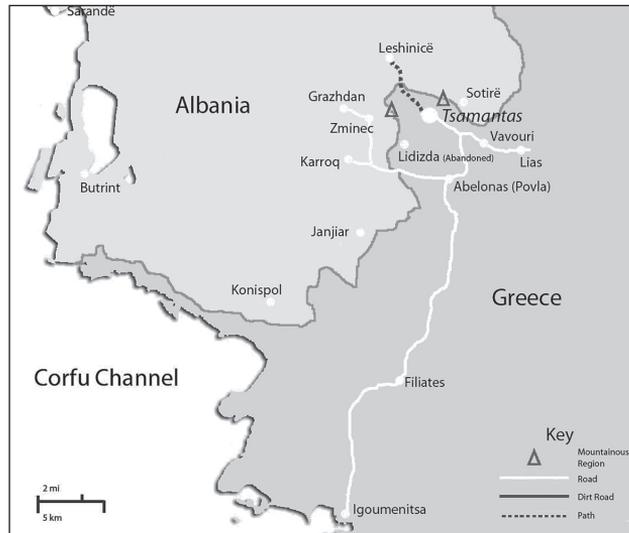


Figure 1: The location of the borderland community of Tsamantas

At the time of the border delimitation, the region of Epirus was still divided along religious lines, as it always had been under the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire. The dominance of a particular religion in any one community, as well as the language spoken, functioned as an indicator of the ethnic identification of that community. Moreover, the names of the villages themselves (as well as local features such as springs, streams and mountain peaks) contributed to this identification, being in origin either Greek, Albanian or Slavic. As a consequence, the ethnographic make-up of the area was extremely complex, and was to play a significant part in the response of local people to the fixing of the Greek-Albanian border.

The market town of Filiates, and its surrounding area in the Kalamas delta and basin, to the south-west of Tsamantas, was home to a large number of Chams (Albanian-speaking Muslims). However, the British archaeologist and historian Nicholas Hammond (1967:89), who visited the villages around Tsamantas (on both sides of the border) in 1939, observed that: "By contrast to the Albanian-speaking villages of the Kalamas delta and basin, [most of] these villages are Greek in speech and outlook, and have been so for centuries". In Tsamantas, indeed, every single inhabitant was Christian Orthodox and Greek-speaking, and there was no question that they were ethnically and politically Greek.

When the international delimitation commission visited the area in order to finalise the border, the main preoccupation of the villagers — according to local accounts, eloquently related by the folklorist Kostas Zoulas — was the rumour that the Italian representative was determined to support Albanian interests, in keeping with the policy of the Italian government. There was considerable anxiety that Tsamantas and its sister villages to the south-east would now be assigned to Albania, as had already been the fate of their neighbours on the north-west flanks of Mount Mourgana. The head of the international commission, according to Zoulas (1991), was a German officer who happened to be an archaeologist and who could speak classical Greek. The commission was hosted by Abbot Peschos, a charismatic cleric at the Byzantine Monastery of St. George in Kamitsiani, on the outskirts of the village of Tsamantas. Zoulas relates that the German was very impressed by the beauty and artistic value of the three priceless votive lamps given as a present to the Monastery by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and which hung in front of the gilded iconostasis of St. George's church. The Abbot sensed the German officer's eagerness to own one of these valuable lamps, and it was agreed between the two — in flagrant opposition to the standpoint of the "loathsome" Italian — that the Abbot would give him one of the lamps on the understanding that the commission would push the border further back, so that the villages on this side of Mount Mourgana would remain in Greece. In the words of Zoulas:

... [the German] hurriedly opened his briefcase, unfolded a map of the border area, and with a thick red pencil drew a line; and bending over anxiously, the cleric saw that he had put our villages — Povla, Lidizda,³ Tsamantas, Bambouri (Vavouri), Lias and Lista — on the Greek side of the border ... (Zoulas, 1991).

The 1922–24 International Boundary Commission

In Paris, in November 1921, the second Conference of Ambassadors (this time from Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan) recognised Albania as an independent and sovereign state, following its admission to the League of Nations during the previous year. The Conference also agreed, in principle, to a new delimitation of the Greek-Albanian border, although it largely coincided with what had been determined by the London Conference of 1913. A second international boundary commission was established, with representatives from France, Great Britain and Italy, and at the end of September 1922 it commenced the physical demarcation of the border. This commission, like its predecessor in 1913, was instructed to use linguistic criteria in fixing the border, but was now allowed an adviser from both the Greek and Albanian governments.

Eager to protect its own interests in southern Albania, however, Italy succeeded in appointing its delegate, General Enrico Tellini, as head of the commission, responsible for deciding where the border should run, with the help of Italian topographers. But,

³ Lidizda (Λιδιζντα) — a small village of 30–40 households — was razed to the ground by the Germans in 1944.

on the 27 August 1923, Tellini and several of his colleagues were assassinated while on their way from Ioannina to the border checkpoint of Kakavia, to resume their delimitation work. Even though responsibility for the murders was never established, Mussolini assumed the Greeks were to blame, and ordered the bombing and brief occupation of the island of Corfu in retaliation. Tsamantas is close enough to Corfu to have given the villagers, on clear days, a panoramic view of the island from the upper slopes of Mount Mourgana, and when the deafening roar of Italian cannons echoed through the mountains it only served to strengthen their suspicions about Italian plans regarding the border.

On the face of it, the final demarcation of the border was a resounding success for the community of Tsamantas, as it shifted to the north-west and then ran south-west, across the Pavla valley, thereby pushing a wedge into Albanian territory. But, as Guy (2008:465) has pointed out, it created many problems for the border communities: not only did it restrict the trading of produce from the fertile “Chameria” district — now assigned as Greek territory — to its traditional markets in the large towns of Sarandë, Gjirocastër and Korçë in Albania, but also, with specific regard to Tsamantas, it prevented communication between the village and its northern and western economic hinterland. Tsamantas now began to suffer major emigration, since the reduction in its land and grazing pastures meant that its expanding population could not be supported. Furthermore, as will now be demonstrated, the emergence of nationalism on both sides of the border hampered all attempts to foster trans-border co-operation.

The emergence of nationalism

From an anthropological perspective, it is apparent that before the demise of the Ottoman Empire the communities of Epirus, whether agrarian or urban, had their own unique identity that distinguished each from the other (Hart, 1999:201; Green and King, 2001:272–5). However, in the opinion of the very few anthropologists, ethnographers and geographers who have analysed the ethnicity and culture of these communities, they thought of themselves not just in terms of their local identification, but also as part of wider social groupings, firstly at the level of what we would now call the prefecture or province, and then at the regional level. Thus, although the people of Tsamantas would have identified first and foremost with their village (and its sister communities on the slopes of Mount Mourgana), they also felt a strong connection with people in the wider territory of Chamourgia (now known as Thesprotia), as distinct from others further afield in Epirus, such as the Pogoni people to the east, and the Northern Epirotes to the north and west. But they were also proud Epirotes, considering themselves a part of a region culturally different to the rest of Greece and Albania.⁴

Accounts from the Ottoman years refer to this same heterogeneity amongst the border population, and to constant exchange and communication between the

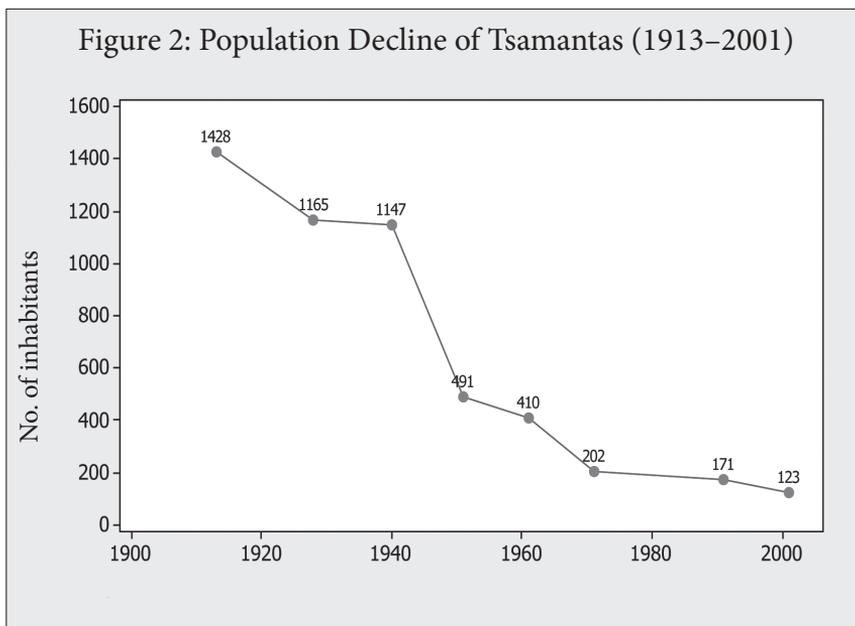
⁴ Minaham (1996:407–409) even suggests that Epirus was a nation without a state of its own.

neighbouring villages and towns, as well as interfaith marriage and mutual celebration of Christian and Muslim festivities. So there is little doubt that the people of Tsamantas identified themselves in terms of their local community and its wider area (Chamourgia, or the region of Epirus), rather than as citizens of the Greek nation. Social interactions were based on the concept of kinship, religion, marriage, god parentage, and economic co-operation.

The creation of the Greek-Albanian border, however, had the effect of encouraging nationalism and religious prejudice, in a region in which ethnic affiliations had not been of paramount importance and religious tolerance had been relatively high. It did so by intensifying national differences at the local level, so that a new perception of “otherness” began to emerge. It also led to confusion regarding national identity, especially for the Greek Christian minority in southern Albania, and the Muslim Chams in Greek Thesprotia. For the border communities, the regional underpinning of their identity gradually faded away, to be replaced by a more national form of identity, so that they thought of themselves firstly as either Greek or Albanian, and only secondarily as Epirote.

The second half of the twentieth century

During the 1950s and early 1960s, living conditions in the prefecture of Thesprotia were so bad that the World Council of Churches sent an international team to help improve the situation. Remoteness and poor accessibility, coupled with high levels of poverty and illiteracy, made it one of the most disadvantaged areas in the whole of



Source: Greek Census (various dates)

Greece. For the majority of its inhabitants, in villages scattered across the mountainous terrain, life was one of “misery and squalor”;⁵ as indeed it was throughout the rest of Epirus. In Tsamantas, people were leaving the village in search of a better life (Figure 2) — in the United States (especially the city of Worcester, Massachusetts, where the expatriate community was already well established), but also in Australia (mainly Melbourne), West Germany and elsewhere.

In this same period of the twentieth century, incidents on both sides of the Greek-Albanian border at Tsamantas — rhetorical aggression, restrictions on movement, and intense border security — created an almost Orwellian situation of paranoia and close scrutiny. But circumstances improved in the 1970s, when the restoration of democracy in Greece (after a seven-year military dictatorship) and entry in 1981 to what was then the European Economic Community (EEC) brought a new era of development for the borderland communities. Funding from the EEC substantially alleviated the economic and social problems that these communities had long endured. Over the border, however, the villages in southern Albania remained in desperate poverty, and this continued until the last week of 1989 and the first of 1990, when the draconian border-security system imposed by Enver Hoxha’s regime collapsed, resulting one year later in the mass exodus of hundreds of people into Epirus. Many of these refugees, by following ancient routes, succeeded in crossing the border at Tsamantas. Although initially the village was overwhelmed by the sheer number of refugees, basic accommodation and food was found, and it was a time of jubilation: at last, the severed links between families and friends could be renewed, and new ones forged, leading to the gradual restitution of the locality’s former unity.

Some reflections and concluding comments

Since the opening of the border, the decline of the community of Tsamantas has been put on hold, and its marginalisation somewhat eased. Like other depopulated villages in Epirus, it has benefited from an inflow of skilled and unskilled Albanians, who have been willing to take on undesirable and sometimes dangerous jobs at low pay. These economic migrants (whether ethnically Greek or Albanian) can be seen paving the village’s roads and squares, and repairing traditional houses and stone walls, thus conserving the landscape. They are also involved in shepherding, the one remaining major economic activity in the village. The establishment of a few migrant families from Albania, as well as the marriage of Albanians with locals, has also increased the number of children in an otherwise mostly elderly population.

One thing that seems certain to improve cross-border communication and understanding is the series of cultural exchanges that are now taking place: for example, folk musicians and singers from southern Albania regularly entertain the crowds at festivities in many of the Greek villages across the border. Such cross-border exchanges

⁵ *The Times*, 23 January 1961.

of culture could be the starting point for closer co-operation between the local communities, which could benefit the economic advancement of the wider region, especially if and when Albania joins the European Union.⁶ Should it do so, Albanian ethno-territorial aspirations would presumably start to wane in the context of the wider union. For the time being, however, the creation of larger spatial entities, perhaps in the form of *Euroregions*, could be instrumental in the economic development of Epirus and southern Albania. The traditional concept of the “nation state”, with its restricted immigration, xenophobic attitudes, and nationalistic perception of “our land”, will hopefully no longer be relevant in the integrated Balkans of the future, and will be replaced by the broader and more liberal notion of the “region state” in a borderless world, as proposed by Kenichi Ohmae (1996).

The locational disadvantages that have always bedevilled the borderland communities, in terms of their remoteness and inaccessibility, are gradually being diminished by improvements to the local infrastructure, such as the new *Egnatia* highway, thereby invigorating the economic development of the whole border area. If, in addition, the former links between Greek Epirus (Περιφέρεια Ηπείρου) and southern Albania are allowed to re-emerge without the constraints of national borders (as they should, if Albania joins the EU), the nationalism and economic decline that has been pulling apart the region of Epirus since the delimitation of the Greek-Albanian border may finally be defeated.

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⁶ Albania submitted its application for EU membership on 18 April 2009.

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