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The road:

An ethnography of the Albanian–Greek cross-border motorway

ABSTRACT

This article is an ethnographic study of a 29-kilometer stretch of cross-border highway located in South Albania and linking the city of Gjirokastër with the main checkpoint on the Albanian–Greek border. The road, its politics, and its poetics constitute an ideal point of entry for an anthropological analysis of contemporary South Albania. The physical and social construction, uses, and perceptions of this road uniquely encapsulate three phenomena that dominate social life in postsocialist South Albania: the transition to a market economy, new nationalisms, and massive emigration (mainly to Greece). Taking this cross-border road section as my main ethnographic point of reference, I suggest the fruitfulness of further discussion of the relationship between roads, narratives, and anthropology. [*roads, globalization, transnationalism, development, postsocialism, materiality, Albania*]

Until 1990, passports were almost nonexistent in Albania, and the socialist state's control of geographic mobility (cross-border, in particular) was near total. One of the few foreign journalists to obtain a visa to enter socialist Albania was Mehmet Biber, who wrote in a *National Geographic* article in 1980, "Today no international highway crosses Albania. Her 300 kilometres (185 miles) of railroad pass no frontier. No foreign plane is permitted to fly across her airspace. Commercial flights, such as our half-empty, biweekly flight from Belgrade, must come from seaward and in daylight hours only" (1980: 532). Albanians' physical immobility was also reflected in the country's significant lack of vehicles; in 1969, the entire country (with a population of more than 2,000,000 and a total of 4,000 kilometers of highways) had no more than 2,700 passenger vehicles and 7,700 heavy vehicles, namely, trucks and buses (Marmullaku 1975:101; Ministria e Ekonomisë, Drejtoria e Statistikës 1991; New Encyclopedia Britannica 1974:191). Moreover, ownership of private cars was not allowed until permission was granted by a law passed on March 19, 1991. Most of my informants stated that they traveled very little, if at all, by passenger vehicle before 1990.

However, within a framework of socialist modernism and infrastructure fetishism, motorway arteries were constructed en masse in socialist Albania. This roadwork was conducted through the "forced-voluntary" labor of the masses. As a Kosovo–Albanian sociologist and Belgrade state official put it in the mid-1970s, "In Albania every citizen must spend one month taking part in work drives; even diplomats roll up their sleeves and give a hand in the work brigades when they are home on leave" (Marmullaku 1975:101–102). A party intellectual later noted, "In Albania . . . you are liable to come across workers of the administration, people of intellectual pursuit who are working directly in production shoulder to shoulder with the workers and the peasants" (Unknown 1984:216). Participation in these roadwork projects was supposed to be voluntary and—according to the official socialist historiography (Pollo and Puto

Table 1: Registered Road Vehicles in Albania (1993–2007)

Year	Road vehicles
1993	129,707
1994	153,886
1995	114,074
1996	114,540
1997	126,258
1998	145,201
1999	149,148
2000	185,982
2001	216,550
2002	233,954
2003	263,901
2004	274,652
2005	284,655
2006	320,347
2007	349,626

Source: INSTAT.

1981:249)—traced its origin to the first postwar years, when the country was reconstructed voluntarily by a society largely inspired by communist ideals. Nevertheless, this wageless labor later became a means for the enforcement of the dominant state ideology on society. The various unions, under the auspices of the Party of Labor of Albania (Communist Party), organized labor expeditions and expected their members to participate, while soldiers and students were often obliged to do so.¹ Hence, for 45 years, Albanians had to build roads they were almost unable to use. Their limited mobility and the fragmented automobility policy of the socialist period paved the way for completely antithetical postsocialist road-related practices, politics, and discourses (Dalakoglou 2009a).

Since 1990, there has been a significant expansion of mobility, including not only a huge increase in the possession of vehicles (see Table 1) but also extensive migration flows. However, the production of the spaces where this mobility takes place, the roads, is no longer merely an indigenous project. The construction and reconstruction of most roads in Albania today is carried out with foreign aid. Via these projects, suprastate organizations and foreign governments introduce their own principles into Albania's political and economic life. Such economic development programs, in combination with the extensive migration, contribute to global politicoeconomic asymmetries, and they are also becoming part of the complex sociocultural conditions of Albanian postsocialist transnationalism.

In this article, I study what is probably one of the most significant of the newly rehabilitated roads—the main Albanian–Greek cross-border road section, the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway (see Figure 1)—and the local cultural particularities and perceptions attached to it. At one level, the current article is aligned with critical discourses about motorways found in Marc Augé's *Non-Places* (1995) and, previously, in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*

(1991) as well as in David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). Augé (1995:73–74, 100, 106, 118) argues that highways are among the most typical examples of non-places, that is, alienating spaces that lack social significance. According to Lefebvre (1991:124–125, 164) and Harvey (1989), highways are spaces controlled by the economic powers of capitalism, and they are spaces of domination over the landscape. But, if one reconfigures the analysis at the microscale of ethnographic research, the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway emerges not merely as a space of alienation and domination but also as a space whose uses contribute to the dealienation of the postsocialist experience. This road section emerges as a space that is seen by most people of the Gjirokastër region as one of the most proximate, visible, and tangible consequences of the otherwise abstract and distant processes of globalization and postsocialism. These people, through their daily road-related practices and discourses, reconstruct the road as a common subject of their narratives, of their intercommunity conflicts, and of their nationalisms; they use it, conceptualize it, and perceive it in their own familiar terms, challenging the prescribed principles of the global political economy of motorways. Still, as I demonstrate in this article, a contradiction remains: The very practice of small, daily dealienations contributes to the reproduction of the asymmetries of neoliberal globalization embedded in the road project, creating a complex, simultaneous process that can be presented ethnographically in terms of sociospatial particularities (see Marcus 1995).

Two stories from the road

The site of my ethnographic fieldwork (2005–06) was not only the 29-kilometer Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway section of the main Albanian–Greek cross-border highway (see Figure 2) but also the city of Gjirokastër, at the northern end of this road section, where I lived during my fieldwork. Since 1990, the urban plan of Gjirokastër has undergone a radical transformation. The city center, which was located around a hillside citadel during the last two centuries, has today been relocated onto the Drinos River valley. This new social, economic, and political center stretches along the boulevard that links the city with the cross-border road. This centralization of the infrastructure of mobility is not only a spatial phenomenon but also a social one, as, arguably, today approximately one-third of Gjirokastër's pre-1990 inhabitants are living as migrants in Greece (Vullnetari and King 2008:147) and, hence, use this cross-border road frequently. Both in this city and on the cross-border road, I recorded narratives about events that take place on the road (Dalakoglou 2009a). I continue this article with two such narratives, which illuminate aspects of life in postsocialist Albania.

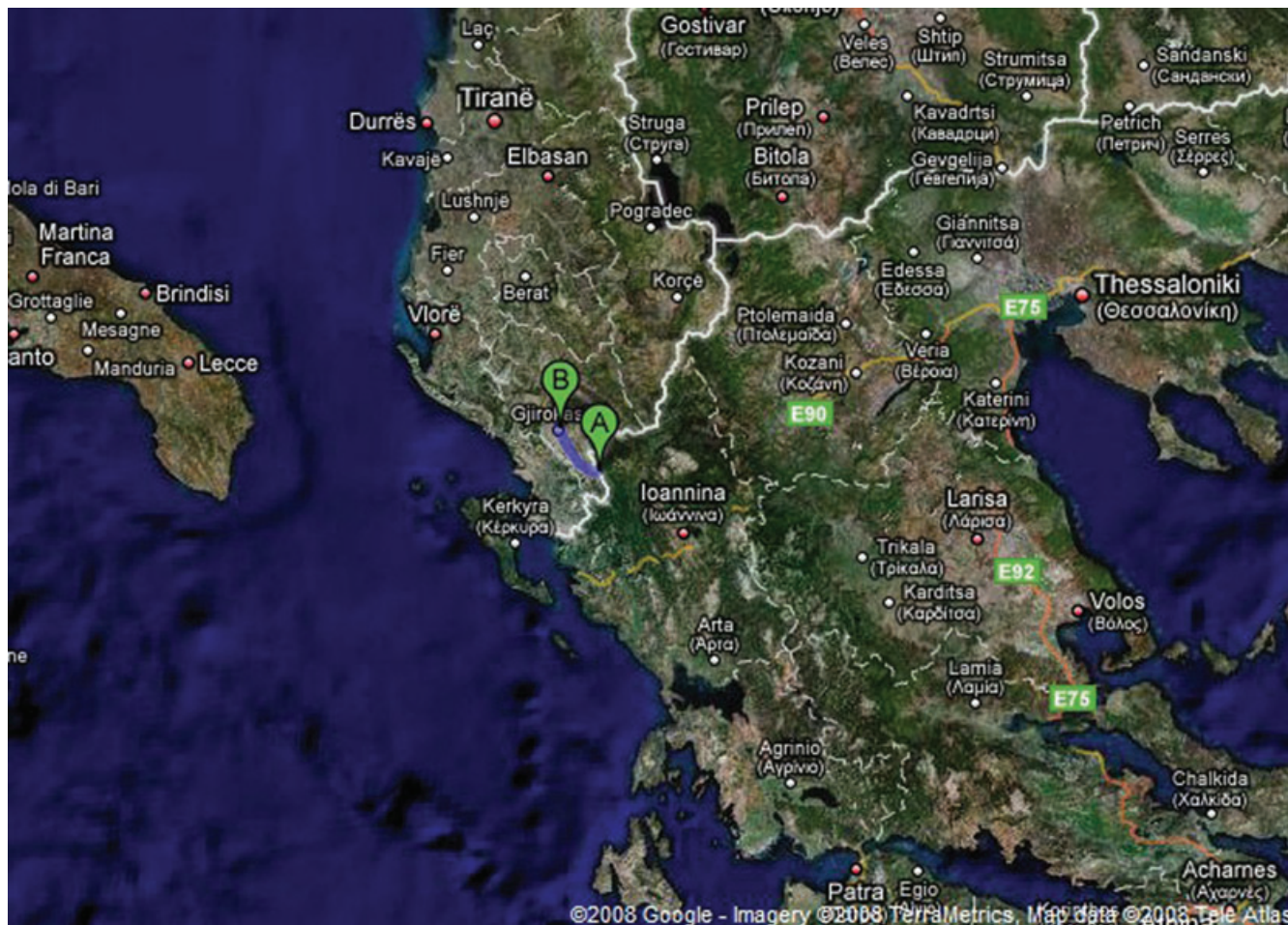


Figure 1. The Kakavijë-Gjirokastër highway. (Source: Google Maps. ©2008 Google Imagery, ©2008 Terra Metrics; Map data ©2008 Tele Atlas.)

Story 1: The outflow of Albanian wealth to Greece

In 1997, Albania almost ended up in a civil war. Violent unrest had been triggered by the scandal of collapsing banklike

pyramid schemes.² During the 1990s, several such banklike schemes were operating in the country; in some cases, the interest they were offering on customers' deposits was remarkable. However, links appeared to exist among several high-rank politicians, pyramid owners' businesses, and organized crime, so scandal soon followed. At the end of 1996 and in early 1997, these firms collapsed, and the savings of the "investors," circa \$2 billion, vanished.³ The result, for most Albanians, was tragic; some of them had sold their recently gained real estate so that they could "wager" cash in the pyramids, and others had "played" their savings from five or six years of migratory remittances. This loss led to severe civil unrest; army and police magazines were looted, and some hundreds of thousands of weapons passed into the hands of outraged people, who rebelled against the government of Sali Berisha and the owners of the pyramids. This situation lasted for several months. In 2005 and 2006, political and daily discourses were frequently shaped in reference to the 1997 "war" and the pyramid crisis. Most of the Albanians I know, explicitly or implicitly, divide post-socialist time between the pre-1997 and post-1997 periods.



Figure 2. On the Kakavijë-Gjirokastër road, in the background is the Kakavijë cross-border checkpoint.

Certainly one of the most important mysteries since 1997 is what happened to the \$2 billion that vanished that year.

A popular story claims that the money was spirited into Greece. A Gjirokastrit informant narrated a predominant version of this story:

A friend of mine, who works down in the petrol station next to Kakavijë . . . and others also saw it . . . the friend told me that in December 1996, on Christmas Eve late at night, a long convoy of armored lorries, with army, in balaclavas, police and helicopters, without lights on, came and passed quickly through Kakavijë and were not searched by anybody, nobody at all! And so then, what were they? What did they have in these vehicles? Why did they pass in the night? Why without lights? You [Dimitris] study Albania; tell me! What is your opinion? Was it the money from the pyramids which went to Greece or not?

Story 2: The influx of dangers for the future of Albania from Greece

Moreover, in 2005–06, in Gjirokastrë, stories circulated about the activities of the Greek intelligence service in Albania. According to these stories, one of several clandestine operations taking place on the 29-kilometer cross-border highway section was the influx of items of archeological interest, smuggled not for commercial purposes but for nationalist ones. A version of a story narrated by an informant named Marenglen described what went on as follows:

Marenglen: In 1994, in 1995, and in 1996 the bodies of dead Albanians unceasingly arrived in Kakavijë. Perhaps, if you will go and open the documents you will find ten dead people per day, but where is the truth behind it? What was happening here?

Author: Who killed them?

M: They were dying! I do not know . . . in the building sites where they worked they were falling from the scaffolding and those kinds of things. . . . One day the superior customs officer wondered: why are these coffins sealed? What do they have inside? He sent a letter to the president saying, “Mr. President so and so, I have worked here many years and have done other kinds of things. . . .” In the end he wrote, “I observed this and that, and I want to open a coffin.” In the first letter the president said no, in the second again no. In the third letter the president did the legal acts, as it had to be done correctly, and let the officer open one. And he took a hammer and opened one coffin . . . and what was in there? What did they find? It is I who will tell you! They only opened one but if they would have opened 100, in my point of view, 90 percent would be like this. Inside there were: crosses, books and a lot of other ancient things of this kind. That was [happening in order] for the Greeks to tell us in 100 or 200 years’ time that Greece was big, as far as here, and this kind of thing.

The wood and the human beings will disappear but the archaeologists will find these items and the Greeks will say, “This was a Greek place.” I tell you the truth, are you getting the trick?

At least two questions emerge out of the above narratives: First, how can one go about ethnographically analyzing them and their chronotope and why do the stories locate their action on the road between Kakavijë and Gjirokastrë? Second, what do the two narratives and their analysis—particularly in reference to the road where they locate their action—reveal about Albanian postsocialist society and its particularities?

On the road

In 2005–06, the Kakavijë–Gjirokastrë road section, where the action of these stories is located, was a materially distinctive part of the highway network in Albania, as illustrated in the following anecdote. In February 2006, my informant Fatos, an Albanian migrant in Greece, and I were taking a door from Athens to Fatos’s village of origin in north Albania, where for several years he has been building a four-story house (see Figure 3). During our trip, about 29 kilometers past the border, the surface of the road changed dramatically: From a new, smooth, asphalted motorway, it became an old road, pitted with holes and showing evidence of rough-and-ready repairs. Moreover, its four lanes narrowed to one-and-a-half lanes. Whereas the road from the border to that point had been elevated and treeless, beyond it, it ran at ground level, passing next to picturesque streams and flanked by lines of trees.

Immediately after passing Gjirokastrë city, and as soon as we saw and felt the poorer pavement, Fatos slowed down and parked on the righthand side of the road. “Let’s just



Figure 3. On the Kakavijë borders, while carrying a door from Athens to Albania.

sleep a little, for half an hour, before going on, because we have a long way to go,” he said. Soon I realized that, almost 20 meters in front of our parked car, there was a metal plaque bearing an EU flag; I left the car to have a look. The marker was a public works announcement for the repair of the highway section between Gjirokastër and Tepelenë, the town a few kilometers to the north. I realized that the only long break we had taken during our 15-hour trip was at the very end of the repaired and recently surfaced Kakavijë–Gjirokastër section of highway. My informant was not the only one to stop at this point; I saw other drivers taking breaks in precisely the same spot—in front of the metal sign. However, there were no facilities at that spot: no parking spaces, canteen, petrol station, or anything similar.

Several of my informants had noted, correctly, that the 29-kilometer section we had just traveled was essentially a Greek road, “the expansion of the Greek motorway web right up to the [Albanian] city of Gjirokastër,” as Kosta, an informant from the area defined it precisely. The material evidence confirmed this view: In the autumn of 1997, as soon as the political unrest in Albania had calmed down, Greek and Albanian governmental delegations arranged the rehabilitation of the cross-border road—mainly financed by the European Union through the Greek government (Goro 1997); simultaneously, some small subprojects related to this road section were financed directly by the Greek state. The Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway was constructed between 1997 and 2001 by Greek contractors and firms with what were considered by local people to be “Greek” techniques and materials; the diverse construction materials were exclusively imported through or from Greece and were the same materials used for roads in the neighboring country. Moreover, a Greek company that has been based in Athens since the 1960s conducted the technical survey and other necessary studies and did the design work. Simultaneously, the same firm designed two dozen other road projects located in Greece, using the same standards and perhaps the same people who created the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road (ADK n.d.). The situation was the same for the rest of the contractors involved in the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër project; namely, they were building various road sections in Greece at the same time.

It was not only the local people of Gjirokastër who considered this road an expansion of the Greek road web into Albania. Most of the firms involved in this road project titled their separate projects “Kakavijë–Gjirokastër,” that is, they started reckoning from the Greek border toward the Albanian interior. Although Gjirokastër is the capital of its Albanian prefecture, and despite the tiny size of the village of Kakavijë, Kakavijë is mentioned first in the abstract topography of the Greek road contractors. It is also interesting to note that one of the Greek firms involved in the reconstruction (ELEMKA n.d.) listed the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër project

in its summary report on Greek projects and not in its report on international projects. Whether it did so mistakenly or deliberately is not known.

Although the techniques and materials used were nationalized in the colloquial discourses of south Albania and the discourse of the contractors, the civil engineering practices and materials generally followed international standards and protocols. The particular blueprints, materials, techniques, and administration may be described as “Greek” because they appear to have come from a particular direction, but analytically the situation is more complex (Penny Harvey, personal communication 2009). For example, the workers who physically constructed this road were Albanians. Arguably, the majority of workers who construct road projects in Greece are Albanians as well, given that the construction sector in Greece, at the level of workers, today is demographically dominated by Albanian migrants. This “nationalization” of building techniques and materials and the related paradoxes regarding construction sectors in Greece and Albania have been addressed elsewhere (see Dalakoglou 2009b). The point I underscore here is that, in 2005 and 2006, the 29-kilometer stretch of road where the above stories located their action looked and felt like and was predominantly perceived as a material extension of the Greek road system into Albania.

Nationalisms

Several of the motifs appearing in the two stories and in the local understanding of this 29-kilometer road are framed, explicitly or implicitly, by the official nationalisms of the two states that are divided by the border and linked via the road. Less official versions of these two nationalisms are also prevalent among the two main ethnic–religious communities that parallel the road: Albanians and the members of the Greek minority of South Albania.⁴

It is no exaggeration to say that the Second World War only ended completely between Albania and Greece in 1987, when the state of belligerence was formally lifted and the two governments first mutually recognized the current border. The 29-kilometer Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road crosses this border and runs over the nationally charged territory of “South Albania” (according to Albanians) or “Northern Epirus” (according to Greeks). The Greek and Albanian states had both claimed this territory since the Ottoman Empire’s loss of control over its European lands in 1913. The road section runs parallel to the Drinos River, where most of the Greek-minority villages in Gjirokastër prefecture are located. In the 1990s, as socialism came to an end, the question of the status of the Greek minority emerged in South Albania. Besides events in the political arena (such as the foundation of a Greek-minority political party and its subsequent banning from elections, its return, and its presence in the Albanian parliament), several violent incidents took

place in the region during that period. They did not escalate to a dangerous degree, but they nonetheless indicate a nationalist turbulence centered in the area of the road. Since that time, Greek-minority activists have claimed that the police oppress them, and the Albanian state has claimed that Greek-minority activists want autonomy for the region, the borders of the Greek-nationalist territorial claim, in the case of the Drinos plateau, ending where the 29-kilometer stretch of the cross-border road ends. The most severe incidents took place between 1993 and 1994, when, after making several nationalist statements, the Greek archbishop of Gjirokaštër was deported, followed soon afterward by the Greek consul of the city. On April 10, 1994, uniformed men made an incursion into a military barracks in the region; two Albanian soldiers were killed and weaponry was looted. The same night, the Greek newspaper *Eleutherotypia* received a statement about the incident signed by the "Front for the Liberation of Northern Epirus" (MAVI). The Albanian government arrested prominent Greek-minority politicians and jailed them for the incident. The Greek government subsequently conducted a massive and remarkably violent deportation of approximately 60 thousand Albanian migrants who were living in Greece without papers. Meanwhile, the Albanian authorities increased violence and pressure against the Greek minority and Greek activists, and an increasing number of minority members were fired from their jobs in the Albanian public sector. Since then, Albanian migrants in Greece and the Greek minority in Albania have been the victims of the two states' domestic policy and foreign policy toward one another (Kostopoulos et al. 1999, 2004).

The dual and contradictory history of the territory of southern Albania has an underground dimension. The following event illustrates this aspect and recalls Verdery's work in *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (1999). In early June 2006, a conflict emerged regarding the activities of a Greek Orthodox priest in Kosinë, a village in the Përmet district about twenty kilometers from Gjirokaštër city. The Greek priest, named Vassil Thomollari, claimed that some of the tombs in his church's cemetery belonged to Greek soldiers who had died there during battles with the Italian army in the Second World War, and, in collaboration with relatives of the deceased, he ordered the remains to be exhumed and collected because a monument for the Greek soldiers was to be erected.⁵ Some of the Albanian Muslims of the village claimed that most of the bones belonged to their own ancestors and not to Greek soldiers. The dispute grew, with some people claiming that the Greek army had never been in the area and others claiming that the poorly maintained cemetery contained the remains of both Greek soldiers and local civilians. The anxiety generated in the local communities, and the "Greekness" or "Albanianness" of the human remains became talking points for some time. The dispute soon also took on political di-

mensions: The local archbishop and local politicians (representing the opposing nationalisms) became involved, and Albanian police operated out of the church where the bones were stored. A diplomatic incident ensued. Albanian television dedicated long reports to the story, bitter arguments were exchanged for almost a month, and the Albanian prime minister spoke out about the issue. Eventually, a decision was reached to resolve the problem through a DNA examination of the remains (see Koleka 2006). Whereas the problem for most of the villagers and the relatives of the Greek soldiers was to identify the remains of their people, the political problem was control of the land where they were buried.

The question of territory is constantly present in the everyday life of Gjirokaštër, where many members of the Greek minority claim that they are the legitimate heirs of the surrounding lands and most Albanians claim the opposite. Another "underground" issue of relevance to this question is the identity of the ancient city known as Antigonea, the most important city on the Drinos plateau during the Roman and most of the Byzantine periods, which is located almost five kilometers east of contemporary Gjirokaštër. The city is well known in historical and archaeological literature (e.g., Hammond 1966, 1967, 1989; Hughes 1830:134). The site, as known today, was discovered, excavated, and confirmed as Antigonea in the late 1960s by two Albanian archaeologists (Prendi and Budina 1970). Since Antigonea's discovery by the national Albanian archaeological school, the identity of its ancient inhabitants has been debated. Although the archaeological consensus before the 1960s was to consider Antigonea and Epirus, in general, part of the ancient Greek world (e.g., Crew 1982; Hammond 1994), since the 1970s, Albanian archaeologists and, then, some of their foreign colleagues have classified the city and other parts of Epirus as belonging to the Illyrian civilization (Prendi and Budhina 1970; Wilkes 1995).⁶ Both Albanian and Greek folk studies and archaeological schools have been oriented toward proving their respective ethnic groups' long historical continuity in the particular territories where their nation-states are located (Kyriakidou-Nestoros 2001; Vickers 1999:1). They have also aimed to ground their respective national claims to territories in the neighboring nation-states. They thus created clear-cut historical schemes that constructed contemporary Albanians as directly linked to the Illyrians (see Kola 2003; Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer 2002) and contemporary Greeks as directly linked to the ancient Greeks (see Herzfeld 1982, 1987). These issues are not just topics for archaeological discussion but also themes of everyday conversation in Gjirokaštër. I frequently found myself in discussions about the language of the inhabitants of Antigonea in antiquity, the exact date the Illyrians had occupied Antigonea, or the "ethnic" identity of those who had laid the foundation stones of Antigonea.

Antigonea is only one part of the argument over the historical territory that used to be called “Epirus” and is today shared between Albania and Greece. The nationalists of Greece and Albania locate their claims temporally in reference to the ancient world but spatially in reference to the contemporary one. On the one hand, what was more or less the ancient Greek Epirus, according to Greek nationalists, extended as far as the areas that Greece has claimed since 1913; on the other hand, according to Albanian nationalists, the sites of ancient Illyrian invasions and settlements go precisely as far as the areas they would include in so-called Great Albania (see Kola 2003).

The Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road was always incorporated within the nationalist tensions of the region. During the socialist past, it was a road to nowhere; in fact, it never reached the actual border, as the border was a forbidden zone. As Sarah Green (2005) notes in her study of the Greek side of the Albanian–Greek borderlands, the border zone had marked the division between two states officially in a condition of belligerence; it was a no-human zone. Then, following the postsocialist transition, and the opening of the border, the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road became one of the most famous and used road sections in Albania, facilitating the massive emigration to Greece that marks the postsocialist transition. However, it also remains part of newly emerging types of nationalism in the area.

The contemporary involvement of the highway in nationalist disputes is illustrated in various ways. For instance, Albanians in 2006 frequently considered it “a highway built by Greeks for Greeks.” This “new nice road,” as one informant called it, is built in an area where the Greek minority resides and ends where the Albanian settlements start. Deliberately or not, its route through Greek-minority settlements contributed to its image as a type of “Greek road invasion,” as local people have most definitely noticed. Plenty of informants from the Greek minority referred to this 29-kilometer section as “our road.” When I asked for clarification, they asserted that this road runs next to “their” villages and that Greek firms and the Greek state had built it. Edi, one Albanian Muslim informant from the city, who was convinced for a while that I was a Greek spy, explained, “Here in Gjirokastër Greece is in command, look at the consulate, it is above our heads [referring to the position of the building high above the square where we were having our coffee] look, they brought the asphalt only up to the consulate yard, after that they left it as it was.” Edi was referring to the cobbled street that begins a few meters beyond the asphalt-surfaced road, which pragmatically almost ends at the consulate. Although the cobblestones are preserved there as part of the old city, a UNESCO heritage site, and although the street that links the consulate with the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway was repaired in a different period than the highway and by the municipality, not by the central state, as the motorway was,

the asphalt surface gives a sense of continuity from the motorway to the Greek consulate, expanding its perception as a “Greek road” by many Gjirokastrits.

Today, nationalisms are even more explicitly in evidence along the highway between Gjirokastër and Kakavijë. For example, the road signs are bilingual (in Albanian and Greek), as the highway runs through a formally recognized minority area, but someone has blacked out the Greek-language signs with paint, leaving only the Albanian ones (see Figure 4). Semantically, covering the Greek signs with black paint is an answer by Albanian nationalists to the covering over of Albanian territory with black, “Greek” asphalt. Given the sealing properties of asphalt, arguably, the supposed “Greek” surfacing material seals and steals a 29-kilometer-long lane through Albanian territory. However, some petrol stations and *lavazhi* (car washes) that are located along the last few kilometers of the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road and are owned by Albanians have Albanian or even Turkish flags flying over them.⁷ One *lavazho* owner explained to me that he has a Turkish flag because, in his opinion, “in 1997, when Greece wanted to occupy Gjirokastër, Turkey was the only country which protected Albania”; someone else told me that “the Turkish flag is more anti-Greek.”⁸ Moreover, several of these *lavazhi* also very visibly “steal” several centimeters from the motorway edge, expanding their cement-surfaced yards over the road surface. The discussion above suggests that they are not hijacking Albanian public property but a type of “Greek” space that had previously encroached on the “Albanian” space next to their businesses. Expanding the yards over the motorway follows the same logic as painting over the road signs; it is an Albanian cover over the Greek cover of a disputed territory.

Under these circumstances, it is to be expected that the outflow of Albanian wealth to Greece and the influx



Figure 4. Bilingual road signs on the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway.

of ancient Greek and Christian artifacts in the coffins of dead migrants—something nationally dangerous for Albania—take place along the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër cross-border road. However, obviously, underneath the landscape of this disputed territory, some of the deeper arguments for this conflict are buried.

Infrastructure development and the transition to global capitalism

The two stories I presented and discussed above do not merely refer to newly formed expressions of nationalism and Greek–Albanian conflict but, as other authors (Humphrey and Mandel 2002) have noticed in other post-socialist countries, can also be seen as vernacular expressions of anxiety and efforts to come to terms with the relatively new ethics of the market economy. The transformation of the cross-border road into a “European-standard highway” and planning to modernize the entire network of Albanian traffic infrastructure are explicitly part of a project that integrates the postsocialist Albanian economy into the web of a neoliberal globalized market. However, this integration represents an uneven development. The country will be a crossing field for European road corridors, yet its place in the global economic system is on the economic periphery, from which it will provide cheap migrant labor abroad, consume imported goods while producing very few of its own, and see its most profitable means of production privatized by foreign firms.

Generally, the main sponsors of traffic infrastructure projects in Albania are international organizations, supranational authorities, and banks that provide Albanian governments with loans or financial aid. For example, the European Union provided a total of €13 million for the two projects related to the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road reconstruction (ADE-IBM-EPU-NTUA 2004, Annex 3:23; Goro 1997). The European Commission; the European Investment Bank; the World Bank; the Italian, Swedish, and Dutch states; the Kuwaiti Fund for Arab Economic Development; the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); the Islamic Development Bank; and others have all sponsored various road projects in Albania (ADE-IBM-EPU-NTUA 2004:Annex 3). For example, between 1995 and 2001, the European Commission allocated more than \$133 million for traffic projects in Albania (PHARE n.d.). Meanwhile, the EBRD (2008) has given Albanian governments more than €90 million in loans for road construction and repair. The World Bank also appears very interested in roads; in June 2008, for example, it offered a \$25-million loan to Albania for a new road reconstruction project, on top of the \$20-million loan it had offered in February 2007 (see World Bank 2007, 2008).

At a first level of analysis, one can conclude that the European Union, the main sponsor of foreign aid

in Albania, is attempting to further legitimize these road projects politically by attributing a desired Europeaness to Albanians through them. The European Union not only builds “European-standard roads” but has also included many current—or future—Albanian roads on the virtual maps of so-called Pan-European Corridors. As the corridors have been conceived, Albania is crossed by Corridor VIII (Durrës–Black Sea), which intersects with Corridor X (Salzburg–Thessaloniki) and Corridor IV (Berlin–Prague–Vienna–Sofia–Thessaloniki–Istanbul). Moreover, some sectors of the Albanian vehicular network are secondary to other major European corridors, such as the modern Via Egnatia, which, through historical acrobatics, has moved south from its ancient route into Greece and now connects the Ionian Sea to Istanbul.⁹ These corridors theoretically unite Europe, and, hence, Albanians, who consider themselves the offspring of the Illyrians—“one of the oldest people on the European continent,” according to the main historical schemes of Albanian education—respond favorably to that monumental materiality of their integration into the European Union, which includes them in its trans-European common identification–infrastructure projects. Yet, these ideological apparatuses and their virtual aspects aside, in everyday terms, plenty of Albanians who want to use these pan-European roads along their entire monumental length, namely, to cross the boundaries of their country and go to EU-member countries, cannot do so because of strict EU migration policies.

A second level of analysis uncovers the economic and political interests at stake in the generous provisions of international aid to Albanian governments. First of all, loans will be paid back with interest, guaranteeing the long-term dependency of the Albanian state on its creditors (banks or foreign governments and supranational authorities). However, dependency extends beyond matters of credit. For example, in 1994, when the Albanian government arrested five Greek minority-rights activists and accused them of being involved in the assassination of two Albanian soldiers during the raid on the army barracks near Gjirokastër, Greece froze several million European Currency Units in the EU aid pipeline to Albania. Another dimension of the politicoeconomic dependency involved in international financial assistance is that both aid and loans come packaged with new economic measures—and a new political ethics—that Albanian governments must apply, for example, the measures implemented by the Council of the European Union and the EBRD, as they appear in the organizations’ own official documents. The priorities of the EBRD are clearly linked with a gross neoliberalist agenda:

Supporting the rehabilitation and restructuring of the transport and energy sectors, particularly within a regional context, will remain the main focus of the Bank. Where possible, the Bank will endeavour to

channel long term finance to private public partnership schemes, subject to open and transparent tender procedures. The Bank will pay a particular attention to the implementation of projects in the energy and transport sectors. The Bank will continue its policy dialogue on the privatisation of utilities and will make it available to support viable privatisation schemes. [EBRD 2006]

At the same time, the new highways primarily facilitate the economic and political interests of their sponsors and serve the interests of Albanian society very little. For example, they help EU politicians take care of EU citizens' and EU-based firms' economic interests. On January 30, 2006, the Council of the European Union published a decision on the "Principles, Priorities and Conditions Contained in the European Partnership with Albania." This decision provides guidelines in regard to every aspect of the Albanian government's policies. Extracting some of these guidelines, EU authorities made it a duty of the Albanian government to take care of the traffic infrastructure in the country (Council of the European Union 2006:6, 16, 19). But why should Albania take care of its roads? To facilitate the "free movement of goods" within Albania and to assist the "free movement of persons and right of establishment" of EU persons on its territories (Council of the European Union 2006:6–7). The term *persons*, incidentally, refers to both physical and legal persons. Further duties of the Albanian government are to safeguard the "free movement of capital" (Council of the European Union 2006:6–7) and to "focus increased financial and human resources on addressing human trafficking and illegal migration" (2006:10). Obviously, the statement on "illegal" migration implies the illegal migration of Albanians into EU territories. This last instruction enforces a key political principle of Fortress Europe rhetoric on the very victims of this policy, non-EU citizens, through the deliberate

juxtaposition of two different processes: human trafficking and crossing the border without papers.

Unpacking these statements further shows what they may imply. Albania today produces very little in comparison with its past output, and its most productive economic activities (e.g., telecommunications or Balshi petroleum) are privatized or undergoing privatization in the hands of EU firms. The circulation of goods, persons, and capital appears to be tailored to these firms' interests. Bearing in mind the Albanian economy's generally limited productivity and the country's much higher percentage of imports from the European Union in comparison to exports (see Tables 2 and 3), this circulation also favors the goods that EU-based companies sell to Albanian customers. Albanians are suitable consumers for EU goods, but plenty of them are forced because of EU policies to cross the borders illegally via the hills or fields that surround the road on which these goods are being imported.

Using the road: Migration and asymmetric development

In terms of global economics, the everyday use of the road by Albanians constitutes a parallel and supplementary process to the dependency relationships incorporated into its construction. This scheme corresponds to the motif of the outflow of Albanian wealth to Greece that appears in one of the two stories I relate above. This outflow of wealth refers to two parallel outflows: one, of people, as the most productive age groups migrate from Albania to Greece, and, two, of the remittances of Albanian migrants that eventually return to Greece. Although these kinds of flows lead Albania into a relationship of further economic dependency on the Greek economy and, more generally, on the EU economy and although the outflow-of-wealth story is generally

Table 2: Official Flow of Goods in Foreign Trade (1993–2007)

Year	Export	Import	Trade balance	Trade volume	The percentage of coverage
1993	12,499	58,336	-45,838	70,835	21.4
1994	13,387	57,019	-43,632	70,406	23.5
1995	18,710	66,147	-47,437	84,857	28.3
1996	22,001	98,060	-76,059	120,061	22.4
1997	21,044	95,022	-73,977	116,066	22.1
1998	31,104	126,271	-95,167	157,375	24.6
1999	48,430	159,465	-111,035	207,894	30.4
2000	37,037	157,109	-120,072	194,146	23.6
2001	44,096	190,155	-146,059	234,251	23.2
2002	47,490	210,368	-162,877	257,858	22.6
2003	54,487	225,983	-171,496	280,469	24.1
2004	62,121	236,072	-173,951	298,193	26.3
2005	65,818	262,191	-196,373	328,009	25.1
2006	77,405	299,147	-221,742	376,553	25.9
2007	96,688	376,796	-280,108	473,484	25.7

Source: INSTAT.

Table 3: Official Imports to Albania (in Million Leks)

1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Country
54,496	55,039	63,939	93,146	93,717	123,424	151,459	148,233	177,623	193,036	203,719	209,467	226,546	260,188	319,812	Europe
-	-	-	-	2	2	3	0	-	0	1	25	8	5	18	Andorra
1,531	479	658	1,326	985	743	3,357	1,266	6,743	6,457	5,460	1,518	2,428	4,235	4,790	United Kingdom
558	805	1,414	1,072	1,557	1,865	2,931	1,698	1,547	2,675	3,646	2,648	4,561	3,592	5,011	Austria
574	650	976	2,350	1,016	1,390	2,420	1,436	1,387	981	1,139	1,986	2,146	2,643	1,587	Belgium & Luxembourg
3,188	4,657	4,859	3,722	2,519	3,404	4,062	3,735	3,771	3,997	4,963	4,731	7,345	8,150	6,699	Bulgaria
478	313	325	471	300	406	581	1,034	899	762	1,620	2,122	2,568	3,189	2,905	Czech
156	355	817	534	596	617	1,712	552	346	493	855	735	638	480	474	Denmark
8	4	156	28	26	21	521	841	3,908	701	368	500	1,404	765	1,355	Finland
5,014	1,092	835	2,901	1,182	1,368	3,173	2,352	1,760	2,321	2,447	3,858	3,239	2,860	4,074	France
7,030	3,346	3,379	5,681	4,066	4,793	8,980	9,567	11,150	11,804	12,777	14,583	14,312	16,941	20,603	Germany
10,420	13,531	16,335	19,831	24,748	35,891	38,437	41,498	48,946	45,679	45,287	43,644	43,070	47,033	54,859	Greece
420	531	534	886	732	1,036	3,615	1,258	1,417	1,202	1,549	1,802	2,385	1,586	2,098	Netherlands
684	434	438	751	979	1,382	1,523	1,585	2,045	1,758	1,525	1,703	1,946	2,398	3,617	Hungary
107	45	9	48	86	30	219	246	549	631	274	765	1,121	928	1,056	Ireland
17,630	21,327	24,438	39,419	43,562	55,344	54,114	55,244	60,737	72,601	75,640	76,699	76,770	83,981	102,212	Italy
123	677	247	1,386	419	801	1,578	1,857	2,428	4,527	3,458	3,068	3,107	4,267	3,647	Croatia
1	308	522	56	232	165	186	97	38	41	31	8	1	1	4	Malta
1,919	1,392	1,549	1,971	1,942	1,703	2,633	3,417	2,192	2,318	1,901	2,460	3,205	4,777	7,284	Macedonia
44	32	19	37	32	36	880	749	713	40	37	66	89	220	222	Norway
418	75	65	94	59	53	175	114	133	246	565	683	1,184	1,601	3,003	Poland
-	3	-	-	6	1	29	21	18	228	42	161	258	219	325	Portugal
309	366	458	2,380	280	509	902	865	1,722	2,211	1,849	1,020	1,900	5,157	1,594	Romania
402	259	230	219	64	1,038	492	2,764	2,437	5,454	6,387	6,590	10,563	12,188	15,373	Russia
386	524	1,036	1,132	1,429	2,118	2,540	1,965	2,102	2,560	3,233	1,824	1,886	2,334	2,624	Slovenia
16	14	942	80	634	1,142	2,908	1,827	2,323	2,900	3,870	3,518	4,432	5,078	5,009	Spain
135	279	138	350	20	35	922	108	1,777	1,127	767	1,380	1,524	1,489	1,033	Sweden
1,760	2,690	2,786	4,119	4,157	4,152	8,179	8,401	11,590	12,796	14,830	16,764	19,624	22,793	27,462	Turkey
46	137	162	342	379	1,069	908	457	2,039	2,543	5,656	5,860	7,495	11,469	9,877	Ukraine
941	675	566	1,900	1,523	2,041	3,291	1,933	1,778	1,808	1,742	5,879	2,513	3,258	18,366	Switzerland
87	3	-	26	117	156	97	1,238	860	1,816	1,033	1,354	1,634	2,662	11,250	Serbia-Montenegro
114	38	46	38	69	116	92	109	269	359	768	1,513	3,189	3,889	1,381	Others

Source: INSTAT.

negatively charged by the storytellers, usually, at the microlevel of daily life, people present everyday flows on the 29-kilometer cross-border road positively.

According to statistical data (Vullnetari and King 2008), about a third of Gjirokastër's one-time inhabitants now live as migrants, yet colloquial, everyday estimates put the percentage much higher. As most Gjirokastrits would reckon, "Gjirokastër has about 50 thousands inhabitants, half in [Albania], half out [abroad]." Certainly there are obvious contradictions and controversies incorporated in the migratory experience and the personal narratives I recorded in the area and on the road. However, when the majority of migrants and their relatives narrate their migration-related experiences, they usually do so within a positive framework, which expresses, if nothing else, a hope for the newness of migration as such. Although EU and other states set remarkable restrictions on the migration of Albanians, still, in comparison with the socialist past—when migration was banned and passports were not available—the post-

socialist circumstances are a clear improvement. Simultaneously, the remittances and frequent gifts from migrants to their relatives who remain in Albania constitute salvation from the poverty those people would otherwise have to endure. Moreover, this flow of things materializes and shapes the social relationships between migrants and their people back home. For the people of Gjirokastër, the inflow of money and gifts and the consequent maintenance of transnational social relationships certainly take place today on the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway, as people generally prefer to carry things to their relatives, rather than sending them via banks or by post.

The collective desire for migration dates back to the period between the late 1940s and 1990, when the Albanian borders were essentially sealed. As Green (2005) explains, it took several decades—between their initial establishment (1913) and the late 1940s—for the borders to be spatially and culturally forced on local communities. Nevertheless, their sociocultural ambiguity led the respective states

to enforce these borders very strictly to curtail movement among local communities. This enforcement assumed dramatic dimensions when, for example, members of the same family ended up in different nation-states and with different and conflicting national affiliations. A story narrated in the village of Longos indicates further the simultaneously comical and tragic consequences of the newly established border in that area. The custom in the area during the early 1950s was for the restroom to be separated from the main house; the new border was initially so arbitrary that at various points it ran through villagers' backyards, between buildings. This led to a woman from Longos, in her seventies, being killed on her way to the toilet by the area's new Albanian border guard, who had orders to shoot at escapees into Greece.

The decisive events that led to the gradual collapse of socialism in Albania were the riots in the Tiranë street where the foreign embassies were concentrated. Young men and women tried to symbolically cross the borders by jumping over the fences of the foreign embassies and clashed with the police, who tried to prevent that profound outflow. In 1990, the entire, once-sealed, southern Albanian border with Greece was transformed into a vast crossing field, manifesting the explosive desire of Albanian people to travel abroad. The Albanian exodus to the south started after the riots around the embassies in Tiranë, in the summer of 1990, and it peaked in the winter of the same year. An informant from Gjirokastër recalled his first encounter with migrants on the highway that year:

"Oh guys," I called [to] them, "how are you, where are you going?" They just said that they had relatives down in Goranxhi [a Greek-minority village], but they were lying because I wished them "to have a good trip" in Greek, [showing] that I knew to say it, and they did not know how to answer. Later we saw others a lot, every day more and more, and at night you could hear them walking through. . . . Slowly ours [Gjirokastrits] learn it too and started going to Greece, every day more and more kids [young men] were missing from their jobs. In a while it became like [the] sea, people were walking. . . . running. The place filled up with people walking out, thousands. In the beginning they were lying but then they were telling you, "we go out to Greece," who could stop them? They were so many.

According to a report by the International Organization of Migration's Tiranë office (de Zwager et al. 2005), during the night of December 30–31, 1990, alone, more than 800 Albanian citizens crossed the Greek–Albanian border. Other statistics are even more impressive: The Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated that more than 25,000 Albanians crossed the sea straits between the two countries in March 1991 (de Zwager et al. 2005). In 2000, it was estimated that at least 800,000 Albanians were migrants in Greece and

Italy alone, in comparison with 2.5 million living within the home country (Barjaba and King 2005:3). The Greek census of 2001 offered an approximate figure of more than 430 thousand Albanian migrants living there.

Albanian migrant informants favor saying that "half of Albania is in Greece," and some of the more nationalist among them prefer to add that "half the Greeks are Albanians," referring to the Albanian-speaking communities (Arvanites) who have lived throughout Greece ever since the Ottoman period, when the nation-state boundaries did not exist. Yet the real question is not so much the size of migratory flows, because everyone agrees that the number of migrants from Albania is unprecedented in comparison with the total population. Instead, the question is qualitative: What exactly does this vast migratory flow mean for the migrants themselves, and how have they articulated their migratory experiences?

Albanian migrants articulated a discourse in reference not only to the relative freedom to migrate abroad but also to the material culture of daily life. Eni, a very helpful friend and informant of mine was very precise about this. During a trip on the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road, he mentioned, "In Albania we were fenced in, like the animals, for forty years. . . . it was not that we had problems, how could we know if we had anyway, we had no idea what was going on outside, it was just the feeling of not being able to go somewhere else." During the same conversation, he also stressed what I found to be a core element of Albanian migrant's experience, the restricted material framework of Albanian socialism: "In there [Albania] we had nothing, out here you had everything!"

The Albanian socialist regime imposed very specific and restricted material conditions. In its last years, its economic anomalies caused gradual shortages of many goods, such as foodstuffs, water, electricity, and petrol, in various areas of the country. Petrol was fundamental for cooking because almost the entire population used either one type of petrol-based cooking equipment or open fires. Even the central committee of the Party of Labor stated in one of the one-party government's last publications in 1990, in a rare spirit of self-critique, "Nothing can justify the shortages of vegetables, milk, even of meat in the market of any city" (Vickers and Pettifer 1997:22). As Verdery (1996) describes for Rumania, the main characteristic of the Albanian socialist economy was state control of production and consumption; in a sense, the state called for deficiencies in the variety and availability of goods as a show of its force in determining every individual's everyday way of life. Even when something was unofficially imported and found its way to recipients, various state apparatuses restricted access to it. A female informant who graduated from secondary school in the mid-1980s recalled that her uncle, as a prewar migrant to the United States, had sent two pairs of denim trousers to her and her sister. When she wore them for the first time, the

chief of the local party youth, who was her schoolmate, accused her of “bringing petite bourgeoisie habits from America to Albania.” A teacher at her school who knew her family visited their house the next afternoon and advised her father not to allow his daughter to cause provocation and make a “bad name,” yet the girl had no other pair of trousers to wear, only skirts.

The main problem was not that people did not have enough during socialism. Rural Albania had been extremely poor before socialism and had known extreme inequalities. The problem was that the socialist state took particular care to teach Marxist and Leninist sociology systematically. The “masses,” consequently, could see that during the years of the party, although there was (usually) no lack of bread, they were being exploited much in the same way they had been in the past, but by a different kind of master and within a different ideological framework.

Shortages, in combination with the ban on migration, had become the rule of everyday life for Albanians, directly contributing to the rebellion of the summer of 1990 and, thus, the transition to postsocialism. The migration outbreak and the consequent migrant flows were inseparably and explicitly linked with the challenge to the material dimensions of the old regime (Mai and Schwandner-Sievers 2003:942). As already noted, almost every informant will agree that the poverty in Albania, in combination with the actual or imagined affluence abroad, led them to migrate. In the literature containing testimony of Albanians’ initial migration experiences to Greece (e.g., King et al. 1998; Nitsiakos 2003; Vickers and Pettifer 1997:40, 41), both migrants and analysts frame the basic comparison between the Albanian sending context and the Greek destination in absolutely material terms.

The image of automobiles full of various items queuing at the Kakavijë border post or speeding along the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër highway is one that I encountered on a daily basis during 2005 and 2006. From the very first months of the migration outbreak, and given their newfound mobility as such and its scale, Albanian migrants returned from Greece to Albania—temporarily or permanently—carrying various items back for other members of their household units or for themselves. The nature of these goods ranged from foodstuffs that were scarce in the first years of capitalism in Albania (e.g., soft and alcoholic drinks and chocolates) to cars, cell phones, and foreign clothes, shoes, and cosmetics, especially for younger members of households, as well as household devices (such as electric cookers, fridges, or heaters) and furniture. Often, people also accumulated enough money to buy the vehicle that they gradually filled with other goods in Greece and then used to carry everything to Albania. In addition, it was common to see migrants bringing building materials from Greece to renovate a house or build a new one.

Initially, the flow of goods and remittances from migrants to their families and friends in Albania replaced market and labor mechanisms that had become paralyzed. Semantically, however, this flow of goods itself constituted a social network, which explains why these flows have continued today, when the market functions properly on the level of consumption, and it also explains why migration and its accompanying material flows are framed frequently within increasingly positive contexts by the majority of Albanians.

The transition in Albania was not merely a transition from socialism to capitalism but from a closed, sealed xenophobic society to a society with open borders. Although Greece is geographically proximate (which can challenge the use of the term *transnationalism*), crossing the country’s border for the first time was a unique experience of displacement for most Albanians who did so. The unusual geographic distance led to a renegotiation of the ontology of the networks that previously existed so that new practices of network constitution emerged via the flows of goods. The importance of familial, friendship, or community networks did not diminish; the nexuses were simply refashioned according to the new migratory pragmatics. Besides a practical contestation of the socialist productive and consuming model, the flows of material goods also constitute practices of remote networking between the members of various groupings. The boundary crossing that had suddenly emerged in Albanian society gave rise to the wish to maintain relations beyond the border, leading to the transnational materialization of the social bond.¹⁰

The dispatch and carrying of money and things and, of course, the associated creation of new social ties physically take place precisely on the cross-border highways, especially the Kakavijë–Gjirokastër road, which is the largest one. One should nonetheless remember that, on the macrolevel, both migration and the dispatch of money and goods are parts of the broader picture of the neoliberal global economy of inequalities.

The road

This article’s point of departure was two stories I recorded on the largest Albanian–Greek cross-border motorway. I cannot know if the events happened as they are presented in the stories, or if they even happened at all. However, what is more important than their accuracy is that these stories exist, are being narrated and circulated, and are being used by people to explain their dynamic daily life in postsocialist South Albania. These stories are allegories for three phenomena that dominate Albanian postsocialism: nationalisms, the transition to a market economy, and the massive emigration of Albanians abroad. The common element between the two stories and these three phenomena is the road: It is on the road that the two stories locate their action

and where all three phenomena and their contradictions or paradoxes are tangibly and visibly enacted by people and, consequently, are observable to ethnographic research.

Authors have often commented on the relationship between written or oral narratives and roads. Mikhail Bakhtin suggests in *The Dialogic Imagination* that “the importance of the chronotope of the road in literature is immense: it is a rare work which does not contain a variation of this motif” (1982:98). This relationship is also recorded ethnographically: Ethnologists who have studied motor roads in places as diverse as Portugal (Pina-Cabral 1987), Spain (Roseman 1996), Peru (Harvey 2005), southern Niger (Masquelier 1992, 2002), Scandinavia (Löfgren 2004), the highlands of Papua New Guinea (Hayano 1990; O’Hanlon and Frankland 2003; Stewart and Strathern 1999), Bosnia-Herzegovina (Coles 2002), Madagascar (Cole 1998; Thomas 2002), the Central African Republic (Giles-Vernick 1996), Laos (Trankell 1993), the United States (Stewart 1996), and Palestine (Selwyn 2001) have mentioned that roads trigger people’s imaginations and are frequently incorporated into the tales and stories of those who travel on or live close to them. Orvar Löfgren (2004) suggests the emblematic relationship between road-bridge engineering and creative imagination, proposing a term that combines both: “imagineering.”

This fundamentally Bakhtinian relationship between poetical schemes and roads, which is also ethnographically observed, deserves further elaboration in light of the current ethnography of the road in South Albania and other ethnographies that depart from local narratives that locate their action on motor roads. In one of these other cases, that of southern Niger, Adeline Masquelier (2002:834) rightly argues that one cannot reduce stories about dangers and risk on roads in the global periphery to a simple critique of automobility, nor should one attribute them solely to the traditionalist behavior of “indigenous people” who have lost their previous social, political, and economic orders through the arrival of new highways in “their” territories. Instead, she suggests that these stories are creative and poetical schemes through which people perceive and make sense of the complex global economy and of daily life in the age of the fast and broad mobility, migration, and transnationalism within which highway construction projects are embedded.

However, poetics is not confined only to oral narratives. The anthropological notion of “poetics” usually includes and goes beyond the oral creativity of storytelling; it refers to the collective nonverbal improvisation and “performance” of, for example, spaces and identities. In this sense it refers back to the original etymology of the term *poetics*, namely, to the notion of creation and construction. In the Albanian case, I am talking about the poetics comprising both narrations of the Kakavijë-Gjirokastër highway and the spatial practices on the highway that lead to the

creation of local road-related cosmologies, which are translating and integrating the road into the new conditions of daily life. This situation is similar to that analyzed by Sharon Roseman in *How We Built the Road* (1996), in which Galician villagers in Spain poetically manipulate oral narratives concerning the building of a road in favor of the local politics of memory. In the Santiago de Carreira version of the road’s history, forced labor for road building became, in later local narrations, volunteering and active political lobbying by the villagers. After three decades, the road has gone from being something alien that locals actually disliked to being internalized in local cosmologies and adopted by the villagers, who socially constructed a new road, absolutely related to, but at the same time different from, the one physically built.

In the case of Albania, I analyzed the politicoeconomic framework of the road stories, and I added the dimension of narratives and the spatial poetics of daily use of the road, which reveals how people eventually negotiate the tensions of a complex and transitional postsocialist everyday life in reference to the Kakavijë-Gjirokastër highway. Via their practices and narratives, they go beyond the macropolitical and macroeconomic implications of their road-related daily activities (migrating, returning, consuming, and remitting), and they reclaim their own agency in perceiving and socially constructing the road and, more generally, the conditions of their everyday lives. These road poetics potentially resolve the contradictions of postsocialism, at least in part. Similarly, the inhabitants of the West Virginia miners’ settlements that Kathleen Steward (1996) studied and the villagers of Roseman’s (1996) Santiago de Carreira, although conventionally and initially appearing peripheral and left behind by road modernization projects, reclaim, through their poetics, their centrality to their own version of road modernization. Nevertheless, as Masquelier (2002) suggests, within the road’s poetics, the contradictions of neoliberal globalization remain: The same practices that give agency to society are part of the bigger picture of an asymmetric globalization of sovereignty.

Anthropology on the road

Nevertheless, beyond the social constructions and narrations of the road, one should always bear in mind that roads are also physical, spatial, and material entities. This implies several presuppositions and perhaps some limitations in their sociocultural constructions. However, the materiality of a road network, and, in particular, of a cross-border network, is a dimension of roads that merits further elaboration.

First of all, the material aspects and their similarities suggest a more general category of “road” that, without underestimating the diversity and the particularities, allows for the extension of certain comparisons and discussions

about roads. Although the case study of this article is a cross-border road in postsocialist Albania, the research potential of roads can be expanded ethnographically to other places. Motor roads as such, and other organized routes, occur globally and as frequently as other anthropologically popular material creations, such as houses, clothing, and art items. Despite the increasing interest in them, arguably, roads remain a relatively unusual subject for study by socio-cultural anthropologists.

Historically, one can find various ethnographic reactions to motor roads. For example, E. E. Evans-Pritchard underestimated their impact on Zande:

I have used the past tense when speaking of Zande territorial distribution, since lately they have been slowly concentrated along government roads or into large settlements in order to combat sleeping-sickness. . . . Long rectangular settlements straggle along both sides of government roads at distances varying from a mile to several miles between each. They are of so recent a formation that it is difficult to ascribe to them any great change in the life of the Azande. [1932:292]

In another instance, he mentioned,

I am not concerned here with those changes, which were mostly imposed on the Azande and are—when I use the present tense the reference is to the years 1926–30—not regarded by them as part of their way of life but something to be passively accepted or to be circumvented or ignored. To give one example: though the Administration compelled them to maintain wide roads it was noticeable that when a group of Azande walked down them they did so in single file as they were accustomed to do along their bush paths. [Evans-Pritchard 1960:311]

In other cases, the construction of roads suitable for motor vehicles was seen as the end of “isolation,” as in New Guinea:

More than anything else, the completion of the jeep road opened up the Fore region, changing it almost overnight from an isolated region to one open to free travel and commerce and, more important, in contact with the outside world. . . . The power of the road is hard to overestimate. It was a great artery where only restricted capillaries had existed before, and down this artery came a flood of new goods, new ideas, new peoples, and, above all, excitement. . . . It was to the Fore an opening to a new world. [Sorenson 1972:366]

However, this opening was not always seen as positive. For example, Michael Herzfeld notes that in Glendi, the Cretan village where socially controlled animal theft was the basis of the poetics of manhood (society’s most significant system of reference), “The roads that entangle and sur-

round the would-be thieves on the mountainside symbolize the strangulation to which theft itself is now subjected” (1985:270).

One could argue that, historically, sometimes low-quality roads almost constituted a criterion for determining a place’s appropriateness (or not) for ethnographic research. For example, descriptions like the following, by Franz Boas, sound familiar to many contemporary ethnologists: “The natives who had visited Padli in March had reported that the road was very bad; that the land was very nearly clear of snow and that the sledge would have to be carried over high rocks” (1884:265). Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss stated, regarding Brazil, “I occasionally took that step on horseback with some colleagues when we came to the end of one of the few roads available at the time” (1971:45). In another instance, Edmund Leach, interviewed by Adam Kuper, recalled his first ethnographic excursion in China: “Chungking itself was still a mediaeval city, all steps and sedan chairs. No roads or motor vehicles except the odd half-disintegrated bus” (1986:375). Even some of the most reflexive authors have made similar comments about the motorways in the places they have conducted their fieldwork. Paul Rabinow noted in Morocco, “The road for the first five miles is little more than a path—untarred, pitted, and winding and steep in places” (2007:44). Of course these ethnographers’ observations are understandable; accessing their geographically “semi-isolated” subjects was not easy at all. Moreover, these statements imply a pragmatic or imagined “cultural distance” between the ethnologists’ world and their subjects’ worlds. Paved and good-quality roads were something that one could find in the modern Western metropolis where these anthropologists were based, not in China, Morocco, or the depths of the Amazon. After all, anthropology was, for many years, mainly the study of non-Westerns and nonmoderns, and, thus, paved roads would have been an odd element in the field for many anthropologists.¹¹

However, today anthropological research is focusing more and more on roads and, particularly, on motorways. I cite several works on the topic in the previous paragraphs, and this article constitutes one more. Probably, the principal reason for this increasing interest is that motorway networks have become physically more extensive than ever before, and, indeed, the flows of vehicles, people, and things on these highways have never been so extensive and complex as they are today. Thus, the impact of these roadways—material and social—on the conditions of culture is more important than in the past (Urry 2000, 2007). For example, since 1972, the 5,300-kilometer Trans-Amazonian highway (see Moran 1981) has run through the rain forest where Lévi-Strauss was obliged to ride a horse because of the lack of roads. Chungking, in China, where Leach saw only sedan chairs, today has plenty of highways, an international airport, a subway, and skyscrapers. Moreover, since 1986,

when the first expressway in Morocco (the Casablanca-Rabat A3) was built, the country has constructed more than 20 other expressways.

But beyond the banality that everything in the contemporary world is more complex than it used to be and that more roads dominate the landscape, one has to admit that roads' unique combination of characteristics provides important analytical and research potentials for anthropology. The current ethnography implies several of them. One characteristic is their dimensions, which are almost monumental, not just in terms of size but also, for some roads, in terms of diachronic continuity and physical fixity. Roads are the archetypical human-made networks, the first networks that our bipedal ancestors created. In Europe, for example, several contemporary motorways follow Roman lines. Nevertheless, despite their emblematic spatial fixity and its physical materiality, roads constitute the per se infrastructure of inland mobility and flows, both material and immaterial ones, which in turn constitute the dynamic challenge of material fixities in places they pass through. Moreover, roads frequently are both alienating and dealienating, as most are built by abstract entities such as national and local governments or supranational organizations and interrupt vernacular landscape use and perceptions, imposing new types of temporal and spatial practices. However, in some cases, new roads and their consequences are considered the key elements that dealienate previously remote communities from the broader national and international economic and cultural network. Nevertheless, this condition also implies inequalities in access to roads. Motorways today also uniquely combine multiple scales of contemporary sociological analysis, from the macroscale of suprastate organizations, national governments, and their decisions to the microscale of road workers and people who live next to and travel on them, and from engineers and technical universities to contractors.

Thus, the cross-border road in South Albania that I studied in this article emerges as the per se materiality and spatiality of transnational networks and transnational flows in the area of Gjirokastër. This road is a complete antithesis to non-places (Augé 1995); not only does it encapsulate social significance and is it integrated in the entire ongoing sociocultural transformation but it also emerges as the ideal place where an anthropologist can perceive, study, and even touch the various dynamic transnational and fluid sociocultural formations, literally in the making, from both below and above, and on the move.

Notes

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1. For a brief overview of Albanian socialism and its evolution, see Dalakoglou and Halili 2009b.

2. This phenomenon was very similar to the Caritas pyramid that Katherine Verdery (1996) describes in Romania.

3. The exact amount of money is unknown, but international financial organizations estimate the amount invested at \$2 billion (Pettifer and Vickers 2006:5).

4. For a brief overview of Albanian nationalism, see Dalakoglou and Halili 2009a.

5. On the role of exhumation in Greece, see Loring Danforth's (1982) work on death rituals and C. Nadia Seremetakis's (1991) work on death in Mani, in the south of the Greek mainland.

6. Illyrians are considered an ancient Albanian civilization, according to the dominant model of historical continuity.

7. Flying flags is certainly a common practice in contemporary Albania—especially over newly built houses—because they form part of the anti-evil-eye apparatus that protects the house. The flags in this case, however, should be seen within the local conditions of nationalist conflicts.

8. To be sure, some of the petrol stations along highways in Albania are franchises of a Turkish petrol company, which seems to promote the erection of Turkish flags on its stations. And, as mentioned in N. 7, national flags that are found in Albania have anti-evil-eye properties (see Dalakoglou n.d.).

9. The Roman Via Egnatia linked Dyrachium (modern Durrës, in Albania) with the city of Byzantium (modern Istanbul), yet the contemporary Via Egnatia links Igoumenitsa (Greece) with the Greek-Turkish border.

10. The proliferation of practices whereby Albanian migrants carry goods and materials “for themselves” into Albania and their simultaneous building of entirely new houses or renovation of existing ones in their home country while they do not reside in Albania, as well as the constitution of transnational networks through

these practices, are analyzed elsewhere (see Dalakoglou 2009b, n.d.).

11. Although it is relatively unusual to find a road section as the main point of reference for anthropological inquiry or as the actual locus of ethnographic research, several roads have provided subjects for the familial disciplines of history and archaeology. There are many examples: the Grand Trunk Road in India (Farooque 1977; Weller 1997), which was made famous by Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1994), the Roman roads (e.g., Laurence 1999; Margary 1973; Van Tilburg 2006), and the Inca road system (Hyslop 1984; Von Hagen 1976), to mention but a few.

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