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A “Black Film”? - Conflicting Readings of Local Realities in the Albanian Shpati Mountains

Abstract

The article accompanying the ethnographic film "Polyphonia-Albania's forgotten voices" by film director Björn Reinhardt and ethnomusicologist Eckehard Pistrick, introduces an ethnographic perspective to the field of media perception studies. The convergence/divergence of the filmmakers perspective with the expectations of the villagers in Shpati, the ongoing discussion of how to represent local culture visually and aurally and the social relevance of inclusion-exclusion processes are prominent topics of the article. Its material is based on interviews after the screening of the film in April 2012 at the place where it was shot.

Keywords

Albania, polyphony, heritage, ethnographic film, media perception, ethnomusicology, local identity

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A Screening in the Shpati Mountains

Just a small announcement at the door of the local municipality: there would be a screening of a German film featuring two local shepherds: Anastas and Arif.¹ It was April 2012 and the villagers in Gjinar were excited: they had barely remarked the film directors and their small team in the last year who had appeared suddenly and who always disappeared in sudden way. Now they would see themselves for the first time on a huge screen.

The small bar in which the screening took place was overcrowded. Indeed it was a major media event in the village twenty years after the last open-air film screenings of mainly partizan films by the travelling *kino-operator* (film projectionist) Llazar Peci had been organized. Until the early 1990s he has had a huge success with his impressive soviet cinematograph “Ukraina” and his travelling cinema in the service of the communist party. Although most of the villagers had after the mid 1970s access to TV and were used to the small screen, the cinematographic event was something extraordinary to them. The main protagonists were seated in the first row together with the mayor and other collaborators. Behind them curious villagers of all ages filled the small hall – on the backseats and on tables was sitting the youth of the village, pupils from the nearby school dropped in and out for a beer. At the same time Kalia, an important character in the film was sitting less than 100 meters away from the bar in front of her provisory shelter, a wooden hut - without knowing what was going on. We invited her formally to join the screening – but despite our instant pleadings she refused. Obviously she feared the public and was afraid of getting mocked by the villagers. Indeed seating her with the mayor in the front row would have been a sacrilege in the eyes of most of the villagers. In this sense the established social hierarchies and her particular status as an “outsider of the community” prevented here to participate.

The event was initialized by a short speech both by the mayor and by the filmmakers Björn Reinhardt and Eckehard Pistrick. For us it was the moment to give account, to justify our presence and to make public what had been hidden:

“(…) The idea of the film was to depict the everyday life in a postcommunist village, a reality without falsifications and euphemisms. We hope that we can contribute with this to the development of the region in some way, or at least to stimulate an interest in Shpati beyond the region, particularly for the cultural values and songs, which we consider as being with much more value than any of the videoclips transmitted on the “Folk” channel. (…)

Finally we would like to stress that we are well aware that we came here as foreigners in the sense that we have not lived through such a difficult life full with sorrows like you have lived it. That means we have an outsider perspective. During the filming process we have learned to respect the difficult life you live and face every day. “ (Pistrick/Reinhardt 2012)

The immediate reaction of the villagers in front of the screen was astonishing. The audience followed the film at the beginning with a tense concentration. The main interest was not on the message of the film or on the visual-esthetic aspects but on recognizing oneself, one’s relatives or neighbours. The protagonists were looking at themselves on the screen and

¹ All names in this article are changed in order to protect the anonymity of all those who commented on the film. Only the names of the main protagonists of the film appear in their original form.

were laughing about their “acting”, about their communication, they were mocking or mocked by their sitting neighbours. Occasionally laughter broke out.

Impressive was to see also the highly symbolic use of noise and silence in terms of social respect. Like in reality, the watchers remained silent and respectful when the mayor of the village was speaking with his authoritative voice acknowledging his “intellectual capacities” and his powerful socio-economic status. When Kalie, the outsider was appearing laughter was breaking out- a continuous murmuring and whispering especially by the village youth was accompanying all her appearances.

Filming as a representational issue

The film from our perspective was significant in different ways. First it was a collaboration between an ethnomusicologist and a documentary director – combining different sensibilities (that of the auditory and the visual senses), different ways of how to approach the field, and different ethics of how to work. Secondly the film was consciously avoiding a scriptboard and a pre-formulated narrative. It was favouring instead an improvisational multi-thematic approach, growing out of the everyday lives of our protagonists during the time of our stays in Shpati (August 2010, April 2011, August 2011). The film and its narrative line should develop without our active intervention. Indeed the faces and life stories of the protagonists were stronger than of any professional actor. Some of the protagonists, particularly Anastas internalized their role during the course of the shootings, as this role was the same they had in their own real life. Nevertheless we were conscious that our ethnographic film was still a constructed “text”, far from a direct representation of reality.

Our idea was that of a participatory filming, of filming with and in collaboration with the local people. A special role in this collaboration was taken by our local collaborators, particularly by the local cameraman Andon. His presence helped to explain the presence of a camera in several situations and in “bridging the cultural gap” between “Us” and “Them”.

Thematically the film follows four main lines: it intends to document the postsocial condition of an exemplary Albanian village (with the coexistence of tradition and modernity), it is a reflection about the rhetorics and the direct practical impact of “zhvillim” (development), it should bring to the attention interreligious tolerance evidenced through cultural practice, and it should focus on multipart singing (since 2005 UNESCO world heritage).

In all this visual representation was a main issue which we had to discuss lengthily with our local friends. What kind of individuals should represent the traditions and values of the *krabinë* (region)? Which role should play the past and the present in a visual representation? In which sense should the film represent the Shpati region as a homogenous religious entity? In which sense could Shpati be seen as a “typical example” for the contemporary Albanian village?

The other main question was whether we as *jabanxhi* (as outsiders) were authorized to decide what was and what was not to be represented in the film.

All elements which were seen as “disturbing” a purified, ideal image of the region were conspicuously examined and criticized. Representation was such a large issue as it was relating prominently to the outside image of the region. An ambiguous message transmitted to the outside world was not in the interest of the villagers.

While a considerable part of the villagers considered the ethnographic film as a “film i zi” (a black film), transmitting a dark image of Shpati to the outside world, others - among them the main protagonists - were defending the film fiercely as being “realist, aktual, konkret”. Nevertheless even these defenders saw in the film a simple shooting of reality but nothing “artistik”.

Anastas Karaj, an Orthodox shepherd and one of the main characters of the film ironically remarked: “The film shows the reality, it shows the truth. Next time you can make a film about the wealthy people here and give it to them, they will be delighted.” (Karaj 2013)

Both sides however agreed on the strength of the film in portraying cultural values and customs of the region as this was coinciding with their expectance stance: “The part about the folklore was positive.”

Our local collaborator, himself an experienced cameraman commented: “It is a film with thorns, a film which directly points on some sensitive points in our community.”

The film was heavily criticized particularly by the young people of the region. Most of them are acquainted with modern urban life in Elbasan (internet cafés, discos, bars) and they had a different concept of how their region should be represented on the screen. They also felt their absence on the screen (apart from two smaller sequences). Representative for this view is the opinion of Bukuria, daughter of one of the female protagonists from the Muslim village of Kabash:

“The film has shown only and exclusively the poor people, the lowest strata of society. Why did the film not show the other side, something more modern? Life in the village is also modern today. If others see such a miserable poverty they will say ‘Albania – what a poor place it is.’” (Toska 2013)

In this statement it is important to note that how the village is represented on the screen is seen as being related to concepts of pride (*krenari*) and shame (*turp*). For Bukuria it is shameful if a beggar appears, with his head bowed down, with a small piece of bread in his hand.

Representation was a major issue also for the mayor of the Komuna Gjinar who had suspiciously observed the shooting without ever actively supporting the filming project or trying to interfere. An important issue for him was the role Muslim villages had played in the film. According to him the film should have been concentrated exclusively on the orthodox populated villages of Shpati. Nevertheless he considered the film as a “promocion” for his region to the outside world. For him and other villagers such as Anastas the quality of the film was measured also in terms of its success in foreign countries.

The potential of the film as a case study, exemplifying the “Albanian village” in relation to the city (seen as a juxtaposed model of modernity) was brought forward by the villagers as well. Although many Shpataraks have migrated since the early 1990s to the nearby city of Elbasan or to Greece, having at least relatives in the city, they were conspicuously aware of

what image of their village was transmitted to the outside world. In this sense the film was criticized:

“Still there exists a kind of discrimination of the villagers by those who call themselves urban citizens. They still use the term ‘katundari’ as a peggiorative term. If you show with your film extreme poverty, and you show this film in the city, this strengthens these established prejudices.” (Balla 2013) Interestingly the gap between village life and urban life was very much accentuated when people talked about their perception of the film. The image of the village as a counter-concept to modernity and urbanity promoted by more than 40 years of communist propaganda and the politics of the Hoxha regime to erase or at least minimize the difference between life in the village and in the city were still present in the heads of the villagers.

Indeed the representation of time, the communist past and the postcommunist present was another important issue discussed widely in Gjinar, Pashtresh, Nezhan, Selta, and Kabash.

The film was showing a community between tradition and modernity, but several villagers argued, that the film was portraying intentionally a backward, retrospective image of Shpati and was excluding progress, development and modernity as a substantial part of their own life experience. Even Albanians from other regions commented on the temporal construction by the side of the filmmakers. An Albanian singer from Saranda remarked: “This film shows a world which is 100 years far away, with its old traditions and customs. For you it is a curiosity. But we have developed in the meantime – and you have forgotten to mention this in your film.” (Tralo 2013) The same opinion was brought up by other urban Albanians.

Indeed the film tried to take into account the co-existence/clashes of modernity and traditionality in different everyday life situations such in the case of the “brumi” (evening of the bride before the wedding) where the older generation dances/sings their multipart dances while at the same time a DJ plays popular light music from his laptop for the delight of the present youth. Also the Easter feast as the culmination of the film is a good example for this temporal hybridity. The film even opens emblematically with a sequence showing the road construction to Gjinar – introducing “zhvillim” (development) as a major controversial topic of the work.

Exposing and Personalizing Local Heritage – The role of Anastas

When we proposed the idea for a film to our main protagonist, Anastas Karaj, we were confronted with his own ideas of filming reality which differed significantly from ours: He imagined a privately sponsored videoclip like those shown in the Albanian TV on the Folk Channel: A folkloristic group with him as a main act dressed in traditional costumes with the *fyell* (shepherds flute) – posing in front of a beautiful lake or high up in the mountain. They would sing and dance in order to promote the tradition and the musical traditions of the region – which according to him are unique in the whole of Albania. What Anastas was proposing was reflecting the esthetics of commercial TV clips and the esthetics known from the videos of Andon, the local cameraman of the region. He had produced for the concert tour a short film “Muzik Folk – Shpati, Elbasan 2011-2012” which was exactly reflecting the expectations of the singers. Characteristic features were frontality, the use of natural setting as

an “authentic” stage, idealized pastoral images (the shepherd and his flock), and a staged rituality (i.e. the ritual shaving of the groom). Moreover traditional professions like that of craftsmen and shepherds were shown and depicted as intrinsically bound to musical practice. You could see dressed up men sitting around a *sofër* toasting and singing. The picturesque and the folkloric were essential reference points for the video of Andon. All in all it transmitted the fictive impression of a stable unchanged socio-cultural community nourishing a vital tradition. In musical terms the disciplination of the group (visual arrangement in rows) and the preference for arranged musical medleys with alternating sequences of male and female vocal repertoire and instrumental Saze music was striking. In fact the cultural practice appearing in the video was that of a decontextualized tradition – this became prominently visible through the interfering announcement of the different musical acts through a speaker. In all these aspects the performance and the filming were following what was proposed as the folkloristic model in Albania dating back to the establishment of the first National Folk Festival in Gjirokastra in 1968.

When Anastas first watched the film he saw the outcome with mixed feelings: on the one hand it showed him as a main representant of Shpati culture, on the other hand it did not show him in an “appropriate setting” but in his ordinary life wearing a worn-out undershirt, feeding his goats, quarelling with his Muslim neighbours over the price of a small lamb. But Anastas, particularly after being invited for a concert tour to Germany in summer 2012 was convinced eventually of the significance of the film at least in terms of a “documentation”, even if not in terms of “art”. The film came closest what he had seen in television as a *telenovela*: something which “shows reality, which is based on direct experience and which is not artistic” (Karaj 2013). Anastas in the end had internalized both his role and even some of his statements of the film, statements which he was repeating to me word by word in later interviews. He even internalized some of the arguments in favour of the film by the filmmakers in discussions with his fellow villagers. For Anastas the film “shows how we live concretely in Shpati” (Karaj 2013). He appreciates that it opened up an opportunity to make the culture of his region known to the outside world as “if culture and art remain wrapped and packed in a jar it will eventually die” (Karaj 2013). The value of the film is seen by him particularly in his perception outside of Albania. Referring to a screening at the Burghof Festival in Klagenfurt, Austria he comments “If those foreigners who watch the film appreciate my comments as insightful and ‘philosophic’ then they have understood the message of the film and it was a success.” (Karaj 2013)

The concert tour for him was a high point in his life, which made sense to the suffering and exhausting he had witnessed during his whole life. “All my sorrows were outweighed by the tour to Germany. I thought I will go to Germany and even if I will die there, there could come nothing else after it.” (Karaj 2012)

For him both the concert tour and the film were attempts in a mission he had pursued as an individual: “Shpati will not die any more”. (Karaj 2012)

The edge of the society in the center of the film – The role of Kalie

Most villagers showed themselves disturbed or even angry that a “marginal figure” of their community, without any obvious virtue, not representing any traditional feature was

assuming an important role in the film. While we as filmmakers appreciated Kalie and her touching life story as a “natural character” who with her impressive face had undeniable expressive qualities for the purpose of the film, the villagers saw her in terms of shedding a dark light on their community. Anastas who in the beginning showed himself surprised that another character, who did not properly represent any of the virtues of Shpati, assumed such a dominant role, was in the end defending her presence in terms of an emergent “social call” to his community fiercely. He recalls the following dialogue – fictive or not – with the mayor of his village Selta:

‘What would you do as mayor to support people like Kalie?’

‘Nothing, nothing at all.’

‘So you don’t feel any responsibility as a state authority i.e. to accomodate here?’

‘No, she is not one of us.’

‘If so, I will not give you my vote, as you don’t think at all for the good of the community.’ (Karaj 2013)

Anastas appreciated the presence of Kalie in certain sequences: for example in the part where shots with the mayor explaining his rather utopic ideas for developing tourism on a fictive map alternate with images of Kalie facing directly the camera in front of her self-built wooden hut. But this ironic tension between political discourse and everyday reality was understood not by all villagers. Anastas goes even further: “When Kalie appears while gathering chestnuts or flowers the image tells us that even I have a right to live, as I am working for it.” (Karaj 2013) Even the mayor, in an interview conducted in April 2013, did accept the inclusion of Kalie in the film: “Her role was justified as she was part of this community. I accept that there are people like her in our reality.” (Zano 2013)

Indeed the perception of Kalie changed radically after her sudden death in June 2012, several days before a group of Shpatarak singers and musicians embarked for a concert tour in Germany and Austria. Indeed this concert tour was intended by the filmmakers as a way of returning in a non-material way the active help and involvement of the locals in the production of the film. The general opinion of Kalie as being “non-representative”, as a disturbing factor for the general message of the film, mixed with continuous mocking took another direction. Her ill-fate (*fatkeqesi*) was seen in terms of an accusation of local authorities for their ignorance towards socially excluded people. The film in this sense was seen as “investigative” and as calling for more social solidarity within their own community. In the same light was seen the short appearance of the epileptic son of Arif - as an accusation and as a call for help. In these terms the presence of both individuals in the film was justifiable.

Recognizing Oneself in front of the camera lense

Although most of the villagers understood what we were doing, very few people reacted negatively towards the camera. Most of the villagers used them (i.e. during shooting at the local vegetable bazaar in Gjinar and the animal bazaar in Zavalina) as a sort of possibility to advertise their work or their products, others consciously played with the camera taking the role of an actor – like the butcher on the animal market of Zavalina or a villager who showed a bunch of 1000 Lekë banknotes into the camera crying out “We have money in Albania!”

One of the few persons who did not actually understand the filming process was Kalie. For her the confrontation with the camera lens was an exciting moment with an unknown medium. Kalie strongly believed that we were photographing her for a passport photo – probably the last occasion she remembered. Consequently she prepared her presence in our lens as if she would go for a shooting in a photo studio: she took off her dirty headscarf, she combed her hair in the fading sunlight and sat down in a static posture without any sign of emotional involvement. Upon our return for the second shooting she asked us “Did you bring me the passport photo?”

How strange our technical equipment but also our interest in her person and her life as an “community outsider” was – became visible in her communication with the camera. Looking into the lens she looked for her mirror image on the surface of the lens, she was slightly lifting the corner of her mouth and contracting her eyebrows.

Foreign reception of the film and the Albanian Diaspora

When the Shpati singers and musicians arrived in Germany they brought their home with them. During the two weeks concert tour they continuously recalled their home through singing, discussions (also about the film) and through comparing the reality of a “modern Western country” with their own everyday reality. Moreover the relevance of the concept of “home” and homeliness for Shpataraks was further evidenced in practice during the concert tour: the idea of “home” was reproduced in their own tiny hotel rooms.

One evening Anastas and Arif invited me with the call “Hajde, lets drink a coffee together!” in their room where they had improvised a small *sofër* (round table) on a bed with a huge goat cheese, strong rakia and even leek (all brought in the bus from Albania) served on a *defi*-frame drum. While eating and drinking we followed the same drinking and toasting rituals like in Shpati – the “owner” of the hotel room was acting as the *zoti e shtëpisë* (head of the household).

While the film in Shpati was seen in terms of representing the *kerahinë* (region), the village and in a more wider sense the contemporary condition of the “Albanian village”, Diaspora Albanians saw the film differently in attaching the ethnographic reality to the concept of *komb* (nation) – therefore watching the staged reality of the film in the light of ethnonationalism. During the concert tour, accompanying the screening of the film in Germany and Austria i.e. the group was confronted several times by this major question: “Why did you not bring an Albanian flag with you?” For Diaspora Albanians the regional identification of the group was too strong, an unambiguous national identification symbolized by a flag would have been needed.

Albanian intellectuals in the Diaspora also proved to be critical of the film. They were criticizing the pronounced presence of disabled people/outside of society but not in terms of a distorted representation of an “ideal community” but in using this aspect to overtly criticize the multi-thematic approach. Elisa, an Albanian woman living in Switzerland, put her first impression in this way: “Poverty and sorrows of the lives of individuals dominate over the musical aspect of the documentary, at least this is what remains in my head.” (Elisa 2012) In her argumentation the focus on traditional singing practices was distorted by several other characters in the film and several other narrative lines (some of them she considered as

adding an “exotizing” effect to the scenery). For some of the watchers the absence of a script was equalized with a labyrinthic narrative structure: “You don’t get tired watching it, but there is no red line.” Some of the viewers tended to see the multi-thematic approach positively, interpreting the title of the film in a metaphoric sense: as a polyphonic, multivocal texture of narrating.

Other individuals like Jean, an anthropologist-cineaste from France commented on the emotional aspect of the film – referring to what the Albanians called a “black film”: “It is in some respect a film a little difficult to stand, but it does not seem neither to slip into a pre-fabricated nostalgia, nor into a total despair. The impressive personalities make it a strong film, fully honest and seducing with a strong note of despair and solitude of the Albanian mountains. It shows a lost place in the sense that it is lost/abandoned under the feet of the protagonists.” (Jean 2012)

Despite its critics the film had an immediate success among foreign audiences who mainly appreciated the visual aspects of the film: the poetic approach highlighted through long shots and the alternation of interview sequences with “mute” mountain scenery, the sensitive approach towards sound treated as a separate feature, and the ethnographic value and cultural intimacy established between filmmakers and locals.

Living and Filming religious co-existence

When in August 2010 director Björn Reinhardt and me decided for a shooting of an ethnographic film in Shpati, we were not aware that the topic of religious co-existence would get a prominent role in the film. Our main interest was to document and make known the different vocal practices of the region, particularly the practice of “sung dances” (*valle të kënduara*) without musical accompaniment.

But during the shooting of the film this topic imposed itself by the mere physical presence and the inter-related life stories of our main protagonists: the Orthodox shepherd Anastas Karaj and the Muslim shepherd Arif Hoxholli. I had met Arif and Anastas two years before and their male friendship beyond a shared profession had impressed me. For us both protagonists seem to fit into a film which should make reflect about what terms such as “tradition”, “cohabitation”, “reciprocity” meant in the everyday life of a particular village. In the local imagination tradition and religious belonging were intrinsically tied to each other: “to keep one’s faith” (*ruaj fenë*) (in this case orthodoxy), helped traditions to survive, while keeping to traditional customs kept religious practice alive. Our approach to produce an realistic visual account of every-day life in a postcommunist village and the choice to involve Muslim villages in our research was therefore criticized. One of our local collaborators, himself earning his means of subsistence as a cameraman, used the same ideological concepts he applied to the Ghegs (North Albanians) to his Muslim neighbours. For him the main point of difference was the concept of culture (*kulturë*): while orthodox Christians had preserved a high standard of culture, Muslims had slowly taken the road towards a decadent life and a loosing of moral values. Beside the loose character of Muslims he insistently warned us about the hygienic conditions in villages like Zavalina, and forced us to eat instead at his home. Local stereotypes and interpersonal relations were forming the matrix for the construction of large scale representations of what does it means to be a Christian or a Muslim. This mental

representation of “Otherness” linked to religious affiliation, left us perplex. But then we encountered Anastas and Arif, which showed us that beside still existing ideological boundaries between Christians and Muslims the ethnographic reality in Shpati looks definitely different.

Anastas originates from the orthodox village of Selta, Arif forms with his two brothers a quarter of the Muslim village of Kabash. Although both earn their living today mainly by sheep and goat farming, their social status, based on different life histories is fundamentally different. While Anastas is seen in the eyes of the local population as the most prominent exponent of oral history, acknowledged as a *rapsod* (local poet-musician), with a particular knowledge of everything which is subsumed under the term *traditë* (tradition), which is song, dance, costumes, religious customs etc., Arif is considered as a hard-working but modest man, without a particular status.

This different social valuation is seen in relation to their age – Arif is much younger than Anastas – but also in their position they had during socialism. While Anastas had a particular status as brigadier in the cooperative, and has been a key informant for the ethnographic expedition of the then Institute for Folk Culture, Arif did start working under the instructions of Anastas. If we consider this case as exemplary we might argue that asymmetry (in socio-economic status) and a hierarchic situation are necessary for making interreligious personal relations possible. The cooperation between Arif and Anastas is possible because it relies on an intrinsic non-egalitarian configuration.

Their friendship seem to have developed particularly after Arif “invited” Anastas to join him with his flocks on the mountain pasture of Shirok. Pastures (*kullota*) in general are collective property of the village, even in communist times they were part of the village cooperative. The village of Kabash had its pastures on the Shirok pass. Arif as a *Kabashlliu* had therefore the right to graze his animals on the mountain meadow. Since then both have invited, together with Mehdiu, another villager from Kabash, an effective system of work sharing which allows for a continuous presence and working activity in the *stan* (sheep shelter). The wives of each alternate in the role of a *stanore* (shepherdess), which is responsible for the production of dairy products and the nutrition of the shepherds on the mountains. The season in the summer meadow usually begins around 13-14 May of each year. The shepherds return to their family home at the end of October.

The subject religion was rarely mentioned in the *mubabet* (discussions) Arif and Anastas had in front of us, but it is a matter of course that they visit each other for private and public feasts. Arif was invited guest at the wedding ceremony of Anastas daughter, he and one of his brothers is also frequently present at the orthodox Easter Feast and the feast of Shën Maria (Saint Mary) on 28 August. Attending these feasts is a question of honour and respect which is paid to the *zoti i shtëpisë* (head of the household), as a significant part of these feasts take place in the house of Anastas. In exchange Anastas is frequent guest at the highest feasts of the Muslims: *ramadan bajram* and *kurban bajram*. The feast of Shën Gjergji on 6th of May is celebrated in alternation in the household of Arif in Kabash and that of Anastas in Selta. As both are shepherds and the feast is dedicated to the well-being of the flock, this feast has assumed a particular importance for both friends. Feasts are understood by both shepherds not as manifestations of religiosity but as popular events, simply as an occasion to meet in a

joyful occasion. The religious meaning of feasts such as Saint Mary's Day, Easter or Bajram play a secondary role, instead the event is attributed a particular social relevance – as a occasion to utter toasts (*bejte*), jokes (*hoka*) and songs (*këngë*). For this reciprocal visiting of feasts both, Anastas and Arif have to do a 2 hour walk in the rough mountains, crossing the riverbed of the Holta stream. This reciprocal visiting on festive occasions can be confirmed by ethnographic sources. In the case of Lleshan the expedition of 1981 reports:

“In case of family feasts such as weddings and births was summoned the whole quarter. In a similar ways for both bajram they went to visit each other. In case of a death came the whole village.” (AE 1248/25).

During our presence several of such festive gatherings took place. One of it was the Easter feast in Selta in 2011, which was celebrated both in the small chapel of Selta and in the house of Anastas. The service in the newly reconstructed chapel, from which was hanging the Albanian flag, was guided by Kosta Pëllumbi, a popular orthodox priest, who is not officially authorized by the Albanian orthodox church. Villagers who were working and living in neighbouring Greece as migrants commented on the simplicity of the feast:

“It is more simple, the candles are thin and old, not like in Greece with big candles [lambdha]” The presence of the camera lead to an exorbitant event after the church procession: locals sung, danced and played the old men's games on the churchyard, inspired and motivated by Anastas. The aim of the village community was to produce an ideal image of the maintenance of traditions. After the religious service Arif and his older brother and two friends arrived from Kabash. Being seated at the table the Muslims utter the first toast honouring the head of the household:

“We have heard that you have Easter today – so we wish you the best for all the years which will come!” Again here the presence of the camera played its role. For the first time Anastas explained his guests the role and relevance of Easter eggs. By all protagonists this lesson of religious instruction was seen not as an imposing act, but as a playful event, which contributed to the good mood of a festive occasions.² This playful approach prevented even

the slightest impression of religious dischord. As Anastas said to Arif's brother: “Jemi këtu për gëzim, jo për moral” (We are here for our pleasure, not for moralities).

Only on demand Arif and Anastas would speak about religious issues: For Anastas the tolerance he witnesses in relation with Arif is part of a wider religious tolerance, characteristic for the whole Albanian society:

“Luckily, not only our area is quiet, but also in the whole country relations between religions, between the church and the mosque, that is, between Muslims and Christians

² In general the borders between the profane and secular are blurred in Albanian feasts. This can be seen also in the terminology, the formerly strictly divided terms for religious feasts such as Festa e Shën Marisë (Feast of Saint Mary) have become synonyms for the profane *festa e fshatit* (Feasts of the village) or the *takimi i brezave* (Meetings of the generations). The feast on the meadow of Qorrasi above Gjinar, Shpati for example, originally a pilgrimage to the existent chapel, has become a primarily popular feast, emptied of religious content.

appear fairly peaceful. People understand each other's faith. Each has its' own faith." (Karaj 2011)

But he turns also to his own local experience, based on kinship links he creating with his Muslim neighbours:

"There is i.e. Lleshan, a (Muslim) village near here, with which we have completely normal and friendly relations. Or, if you ask me personally, I have married my two daughters to Muslims: the youngest one and the elder daughter. I engaged the younger one in Kavaja, the elder one in Peqin. But we don't feel offended. Luckily, there is a good relation between the religions in Albania." (Karaj 2011)

Arif sees the situation less idealized and refers to the strict boundaries, which have existed between both religious communities up to the fall of the communist regime:

"In former times they [the orthodox Christians] didn't get our women, and they didn't give us theirs. We just wouldn't give them to them! Never. It was impossible. Now after the time of

Enver we're much more open. Before, parents decided for your marriage. You didn't choose yourself (...) There were a lot of quarrels. 'Why did you marry a 'Turk' (Muslim)?'

Only now, Arif says these regional/religious barriers are disappearing slowly:

For the last 20 years we've had good relations. But before, life was hard, and I never went to see them. There was a wedge between us. What was I supposed to be looking for there [in the orthodox villages]? They simply would have mocked me." (Hoxholli 2011)

Also for the mayor of Gjinar saw the emergence of the religious topic after the shooting of the film and was using the film as a welcome justification for his own political actions. In 2012 he allowed the building of two mosques in the primarily Orthodox Shpati region – he used the film as an example that this decision was a just one:

"I allowed the building of two mosques in Lleshan and Pobrad although most of the villagers are orthodox. This shows that I am not doubting, not hesitating when our religious tolerance is put into question. It is the film which exemplifies this reality." (Zano 2013)

While the religious barriers seem to have been still persistent during the Hoxha regime, migration both to Greece and Italy and to the nearby urban centers Gramsh and Elbasan after 1991 seems to have an decisive impact for the reconfiguration of the image of the Other, and the "weakening" of established boundaries. It seems that in urban or Diaspora contexts rigid prohibition of intermarriage between Muslims and Christians has gradually lost its relevance as a social rule. Both Anastas and Arif have their own relation to migration, which has shaken the fundamentals of Albanian society in the last decades: Anastas has "lost" (*bumbur*) his only son to migration, he did not see him for two years as he departed to Greece without documents. Arif at the contrary has himself crossed the border to Greece at the beginning of the 1990s.

Beside the sharing of work with their flocks, and the reciprocal visits for religious and non-religious feasts Anastas and Arif share another ground where their friendship is

communicated: the realm of songs. When Arif and Anastas sing together their friendship becomes manifest in sound. Primary goal is not a perfect performance but a “coming together in qejfi”, in delirious joy. The technique of singing *dyshe*, a sort of imitation technique, enables them to integrate more easily in an unknown song without knowing its text in advance. The right words can be read from the lips of the counter-part. In song as in everyday working life the Muslim Arif and the Orthodox Anastas are an excellent example of how friendship bonds, economic interests and the notion of cultural intimacy are locally prevailing over a pronounced religious and political identity construction.

Conclusion

As shown in the article the perception of the film “Polyphonia-Albania’s forgotten voices” is guided by different expectation horizons and points on different representational issues, and readings in terms of regional or national identifications. The echo on the film was primarily influenced by what has happened before and after the shooting of the film. The extensive ethnomusicological fieldwork done in the region of Shpati since 2008 had established already a “cultural intimacy” between filmmaker and locals before the actual shooting process. The concert tour organized after the filming was seen by the locals as a successful promotion of their local cultural values. Similarly the death of two protagonists of the film in 2012 – particularly that of Kalie - added a particular emotional dimension to the visual imagery and changed the meaning of the presence of some individuals in the film.

A key to understand the reactions towards the film is a different understanding of what “realism” means. For many Shpatarak the film was disturbing as it was not corresponding to their idea of realism largely influenced by the idea of a staged communist folklore.

Another discussed issue was that of authority by foreign filmmakers to address sensitive issues within the Shpatarak community such as social inequality, poverty and disability.

Also the personal stance towards ideas of tradition and modernity and their representation in the film (often a generational issue) proved to be important for individual evaluations.

Film as medium – at least during the screening in Gjinar – was interestingly seen as a mirror of social realities/hierarchies, or better as a second reality. The emotional reactions in front of the virtual protagonists on the screen were the same as if they would have been physically present.

About the long term and transforming effects of this film in the Shpati region can only be speculated – if there will be any.

The verdict of the shepherdess in the opening sequence of the film which we met again occasionally on her meadow was clear: instead of greeting us she recognized us as the filmmakers: “Don’t bring me again in television, it’s enough.”

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