

CHAPTER 2

(UP)ROOTING KSAMIL

The first time I realized the extent of Ksamil was a week after my arrival when I climbed to the top of the ‘26th March’ hill. This is not the official name, but the ‘old inhabitants’ of the town use this name to remember the event that took place on 26 March 1978, when Enver Hoxha went up there together with the then Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, after visiting the nearby archaeological site of Butrint. According to the propaganda of the time, it was from up here that Hoxha ordered that the hills of Ksamil should smell of oranges and lemons forever. This was accomplished in the following years with the creation of terraced fields for the cultivation of citrus fruits, but on that evening in the summer of 2010 I was not able to see a single one. My elevated position allowed me to embrace an even wider horizon than the one Hoxha saw thirty years earlier, because I was higher up on the fifth floor of a large hotel that was under construction right at the top of the hill. The steel of the reinforced concrete columns beside me pointed straight towards the sunset, waiting for a new floor to rise. Almost all the houses of Ksamil looked the same, like overturned trees, extending their iron and concrete roots upwards, waiting to grow again. And from the hill, you could see a lot of houses with their roots out of the earth: finished houses, unfinished houses, endless houses next to uprooted houses knocked down by the bulldozers just a few weeks before and left there to decompose. The government’s campaign to ‘clean up’ the Albanian coast from building abuses and ‘informal settlements’, as they were officially defined, had marked the landscape in a profound and dramatic way.

The Albanian toponym Ksamil derives from the Greek *Εξαμίλια*, which literally means ‘six miles’. This is the actual distance that separates the promontory where the village stands from Kerkyra, the main town of Corfu, the Greek island to the south of the Albanian coast. The Strait of Corfu, which

at Ksamil's height reaches a minimum width of three kilometres, has been a favoured commercial and maritime route between the island and the mainland for centuries, but became an insurmountable border between Albania and the rest of the world after the Second World War. Even following the fall of the communist government in 1991, when the country moved towards capitalism and a free market, this border remained for a long time a frustrating obstacle to the mobility of Albanian citizens.

'Look, Corfu is really close, huh?' Elton said to me during our first walk in the village, indicating the outline of the island beyond the sea. 'It's my destiny. Every day I wake up with Europe in front of me, and yet I can't go!'

More than ten years have passed since then. The mobility conditions of Albanian citizens have changed and today Corfu and the Italian coast are much more easily accessible. Since December 2010 Albania has in fact obtained visa liberalization from the European Union and, like other Western Balkan countries, Albanians can travel within the Schengen Area without too many problems. In the following years, I thought back to Elton's words when I saw a series of fictitious road signs in the centre of the Albanian capital Tirana that indicated the direction and distance in kilometres from the various European capitals, with the words: '*Pa viza*', 'Without a visa'.

After that summer of 2010, I returned to Ksamil several times, both as a guide with a group of Italian tourists and as a tourist with my family, the last time being in 2021. In July 2020, I also lived there through a strange reversal of what Elton had told me about his 'mirage' of Europe. Due to the restrictions on international travel because of the Covid-19 pandemic, during the summer of 2020 European Union citizens could go to other EU countries on holiday but not to non-EU states. I found myself on the shores of the Greek island of Corfu looking at the Albanian coast beyond the sea, without being able to reach Ksamil. All the ferries and hydrofoils that normally travel between Kerkyra and the Albanian city of Saranda had stopped and Albania remained a 'mirage' for me that year.

Ksamil extends along the narrow strip of land that separates the waters of the Ionian Sea from those of Lake Butrint. We are in the far south of Albania, on the southernmost slope of Vlorë prefecture. The main road that crosses the village connects Saranda, the largest city in the area and about ten kilometres north of Ksamil, with the Greek border of Konispol, twenty-five kilometres ahead. The archaeological park and the natural reserve of the Butrint lagoon extends between Ksamil and the border, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, represents a rich history of Mediterranean civilizations and is one of the major sites of cultural interest for tourists in Albania.

Just past the entrance sign to the village, you can see a good part of the architectural, economic and social elements that have characterized the short, unique history of Ksamil. On the right, the remains of the aban-



FIGURE 2.1. Ksamil, a view from the '26th March' hill, 2010. © Francesco Vietti

doned terraces excavated in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to the work of the 'pioneers' are still visible. On the left you can see the disco 'Zippo' and in the background the colourful umbrellas on the beaches. In front there is a jungle of construction sites, houses in various degrees of completion, concrete palaces and Albanian flags flying on newly finished roofs. The village (*fshat*), as many continue to call it, is actually today a town of about 10,000 inhabitants. As we will see later in the chapter, it is not easy to confirm the actual number of residents because of the high rate of seasonal and circular emigration. The official data released by the Albanian authorities is ambiguous. According to the general census of 2011, there were just under 3,000 people living in Ksamil that year (INSTAT 2013), while for the local administration there were potentially over 9,000 (Komuna Ksamil 2010). This last figure tallies with the statistics released by the General Directorate of Civil Registration (2019), who claim the population of Ksamil is around 9,200 people, a number that has remained steady over the decade from 2010 to 2020. What is certain is that in 1991, at the end of the communist regime, the village was home to fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, and at the beginning of the 1970s Ksamil did not even exist.

In the following pages we will see how this locality has gone from being a model agricultural cooperative of socialist Albania to a 'transnational village' in the space of a few decades. It lies at the crossroads of many forms of migratory and tourist mobilities, on a regional, national and international scale.

In addition to the '26th March' hill, a second important landmark allowing views of the chaotic urban layout of Ksamil is the main road (*rruga kryesore*) that crosses the town and divides it from north to south. Tourists arrive and pass through the village using this street. Most of the shops, restaurants and hotels look onto it. Also on this street are located the only two town squares, around which the public buildings are grouped (schools, town hall, places of worship), and since they are located at the two ends of the village they are defined as 'upper centre' and 'lower centre'. Ksamil's first monument was erected here in 2010: a mosaic plaque representing two shaking hands to symbolize friendship and solidarity between people from different backgrounds who decided to make Ksamil their home and which they built together despite the difficulties.

Tourism affects every aspect of village life. Not only does the population double in the summer months, but the possibility of accommodating tourists has conditioned the urban development of the place and the choices of economic investment for the inhabitants and emigrants. When crossing the town, you cannot help but notice the many handcrafted signs on simple pieces of wood or cardboard with the words: 'rooms for rent' (*dhoma me qera*). The need for space to accommodate tourists in one's own home during the summer means that the families of Ksamil build homes much larger than their real housing needs. Investment in housing in turn requires an exceptional flow of money from emigrants working abroad, especially in Greece. These emigrants probably account for more than half of the city's total population.

'In winter, Ksamil is empty, there is nothing, everything is still,' Elton told me at the end of our first exploration of the area in which he lived with his family and where I was also generously hosted in 2010. 'Then everything changes in summer, traffic and tourists arrive, the shops open and the restaurants fill up. It's just like we live in two different countries. Too bad that the tourist season here is so short, only July and August.'

At that time, as the mayor of the town, Vesel Koçiu, explained to me, Ksamil had a total of 2,500 beds, including hotels and private rooms, which were regularly sold out during the summer months. Today, thanks to the further growth of the Albanian tourism market in the last decade and online platforms that facilitate short-term rentals of apartments for tourists, the town's capacity has increased tenfold. There are a hundred hotels open in the city and almost nine hundred private homes available on Airbnb.

Ksamil has quickly become one of the 'jewels' of the Albanian Riviera that stretches from Vlorë to Saranda and then extends to the archaeological park of Butrint, attracting tens of thousands of tourists every year from other Albanian regions, from neighbouring countries (especially Kosovo and Macedonia) and from the rest of Europe. As we have seen in Chapter 1,

a significant portion of these tourists is represented by the Albanians of the diaspora, but for Ksamil it is mainly linked to the cruise circuit which has an important hub in nearby Corfu.

The polarization of visitors to Ksamil is evident. On the one hand there are national tourists, a category that includes Albanians residing in Albania, Albanian emigrants residing abroad, as well as Macedonians and Kosovars (considered by all Albanian tour operators as 'internal tourists'), who choose Ksamil for seaside stays of approximately two weeks. On the other hand there are the international tourists, namely the cruise ship passengers who pass directly to the UNESCO site of Butrint and stop in Ksamil for a meal and shopping. Other foreign tourists rest for a couple of days in Ksamil in order to visit the archaeological park close by and then usually continue on their tour of the south of Albania towards Gjirokastër. The needs and desires of these different groups of tourists therefore frequently collide, presenting the inhabitants of the village with difficult choices in their attempts to negotiate the spaces and resources available.

According to Smirald, one of the first local tour guides to support the development of eco-sustainable tourism:

In Ksamil everyone forgets that the real fortune of the village is to be near Butrint. The site is a great nature reserve; it would also be possible to develop a real tourism system. In the Butrint lagoon it would really be possible to propose alternative tourism, birdwatching, cycling . . . this is what Western tourists are looking for here. Instead, the administration and the inhabitants of Ksamil are only interested in building everywhere! But the more they build houses, the more they ruin the sea, the less European tourists will stop, the ones that really matter and that everyone would like to attract here! But why would they stay longer than a day? To live amidst concrete?

To grasp the complexity of the intersection between migration and tourism in Ksamil, reflecting on the different levels through which mobility has transformed the economic, social and cultural landscape of this Albanian town, it is useful to discuss some parts of the ethnographic research that I conducted in 2010 as part of my PhD. Although time has passed since then, what I observed gave me significant ideas for an analysis of the opportunities, as well as the extreme fragility and unpredictability that characterize the encounters between migrants and tourists in the Mediterranean. I will first reconstruct the fundamental role that internal migrations played in the birth of Ksamil as an agricultural cooperative during the socialist period. I will then go on to show how cross-border mobility and international migrations have grown and transformed the village in the post-socialist period, focusing on the peculiar circularity and complementary elements of migration and tourism flows in the area. Finally, I will examine the micro-context of the family with whom I lived during my research period. Like many other

Ksamil families, they invested a large part of the money earned in Greece, thanks to emigration, to construct a large house to rent to tourists during the summer months. Tourists are partly made up of Albanians from the diaspora who return to spend their holidays here. It is an investment that shows the peculiar roots of a family of migrants in the 'transnational village' of Ksamil, but which also, as we will see, sinks its roots into an extremely dangerous and much less solid ground than appears to be the case.

A New Socialist Village

Just by a little bay on the Ionian Sea to the south-west of the city of Saranda, on the road that leads to the ancient city of Butrint, a new urban centre is being built: the village of Ksamil. Until now, in this inlet dotted with islets, covered with evergreen vegetation of the mild Mediterranean climate, no human intervention had taken place. The transformation of Ksamil dates back to recent years. Many boys and girls from all over Albania have come here and, with their collective work, they have dug and rearranged over 370 hectares of new land, planting over 103,000 orange, lemon and olive trees. Many of these young people have decided to make Ksamil their home. A new village with 150 families has thus been created. Pretty, comfortable houses have been built, together with premises for commercial activities, gardens and kindergartens, healthcare facilities, a school for formal education and an agricultural school. (*Shqipëria e Re* 1976)

With these words, *Shqipëria e Re* (New Albania) magazine announced the birth of Ksamil in 1976 in an article entitled 'A New Village on the Shores of the Ionian Sea'. The foundation and subsequent development of the village are inextricably bound to Enver Hoxha, who visited the area for the first time in 1959, returned in 1966 and finally in 1978. In the press and popular imagination of the communist era, the village appeared as a tangible monument to the leader's vision and foresight. Being a village built with the voluntary labour of young people made Ksamil one of the model creations of the socialist regime, on a par with the creation of a great dam on the River Drin, the railway network and the reclamation of marshlands.

As Standish (2002) elaborates, for forty years Hoxha was the central figure of a myth-building process which powered the construction of the 'new man' and the new communist Albania. Hoxha became the central character in numerous stories about the uniqueness of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy for the country and its people. What makes the formation of the small village on the banks of the Ionian Sea even more interesting, however, is its connection with Hoxha's international policy and with the related visits of delegations and leaders of allied countries. Ksamil owes its birth to Khrushchev and Zhou Enlai's two historic trips to Albania and their passage through the southern part of the country.

The first steps were taken in 1959. This followed the deterioration of bilateral relations between Albania and the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev and his defence minister, Rodion Malinovsky, travelled to Albania to avoid the rift between the Soviet superpower and its small Mediterranean ally (Vickers 1995). Enver Hoxha wanted to assert the Albanian position before starting the strictly political talks in Tirana, and so organized a spectacular beginning to the visit around the Albanian archaeological heritage site. The Soviet leader was accompanied, as an exclusive tourist, along the Riviera all the way to Butrint. Until then, the archaeological site was only accessible by sea, but for that special occasion a new road was planned and built to link it with the town of Saranda. Twenty new kilometres of road were constructed along the shores of Lake Butrint that Khrushchev would have to travel after disembarking his Soviet warship at the port of Saranda (Hodges 2009). This is the most important and extensive legacy of that visit and fifty years later it gives Ksamil a tourist vocation as a seaside resort between Saranda and Butrint. However, the Soviet leader's visit ended in the worst possible way. The definitive break between the USSR and Albania culminated among the ruins of Butrint, where the different opinions of Khrushchev and Hoxha about the place became a symbol of different ideological and political positions (ibid.: 25). Hoxha recalled the episode in his account of that period, describing Khrushchev as a crude man insensitive to beauty (Hoxha 1980: 113):

When he visited Butrint, he said, 'Why do you use all these forces and expenses for dead things! Leave the Greeks and Romans to the past!' Khrushchev was truly ignorant in these subjects. . . . Then he called Malinovsky, the Minister of Defence, who was always close to him: 'Look at this wonderful place!' I heard them whisper. 'The ideal place to build a base for our submarines! These old ruins could be dredged away and thrown into the sea, then we could build a tunnel under the mountain to the other side,' and he pointed to the Ksamil area. 'We could have the most ideal and secure base in the Mediterranean here. From here we could paralyze and attack anything!'

Khrushchev's idea was resolutely rejected by Hoxha, but another suggestion by the Soviet leader was greeted more positively (Hoxha 1980: 114):

In Saranda he advised us to plant only oranges and lemons, of which the Soviet Union was in great need. 'We will supply you with grain in return. In our country rats eat as much wheat as you need!', he said. . . . And he also wanted to give us more 'advice'. 'Do not waste your land and your wonderful climate with wheat and corn. They won't make a profit. Maritime plants can grow here. Don't you know? The sea is gold. Plant thousands of acres [of citrus] in this bay and we will buy the fruits from you!'

Ksamil thus never became a Soviet military outpost in the Mediterranean, but roughly ten years later the Albturist buses began to travel through the

area, and visitors could see large citrus groves and a new village rising on the banks of the Ionian Sea.

Recollections of 'Enver's time' (*koha e Enverit*) remain in the memories of those who are still called *ksamiliotët të vjetër*, the 'old inhabitants of Ksamil'. I meet Ilias, who is sitting at a table in the Taverna Oxhaku in the town centre:

I'm fifty-four, and in 1981 I was young and idealistic, and the secretary of the Young Communists of Korça. I finished my military service that year and, like all the others, I was looking forward to a bright future. I told my parents: I want to go where my country needs me! But those who came to work in Ksamil were given a home by the state, so I came here with other families from Panarit, our village. We lived in little houses near the beach, with four people to a room. Those who were married lived with their families, while those who were single shared a room with their companions. There was a communal refectory and a theatre, and the work was highly organized: eight hours a day, with Sundays off. Every morning, before we started work, we used to spend half an hour reading the newspaper and practising sports. We cut roots, picked lemons, and built the cooperative. Bear in mind that there had never been a village here before, just wolves and animals. Every fortnight the workers were joined by groups of 'actionists' (*akcionisti*), young people from all over Albania who completed their period of voluntary service here. Everyone dreamt of coming here, because unlike other places, here the state paid and invested.

Among the inhabitants of Ksamil, only those who were physically present at the time of the cooperatives are referred to as *vendas* ('locals') as opposed to the *të ardhur* ('newcomers'). The latter are further distinguished by where they come from: there are some from Korça, some from Tepelenë, some from Kukës and others from Permët. '*Është i vjetër*' ('he's one of the old folk'), '*është i ardhur*' ('he's a newcomer') are how the various inhabitants of the town are often referred to. This process of identity-building connected with the cooperative's creation and the fact that today in Ksamil barely anyone can be called 'local' seems particularly interesting in view of the fact that the town is located within the so-called 'minority zone' (*zona e minoritarëve*), a significant part of Albania's territory that was recognized during the communist government of Enver Hoxha as being culturally influenced by a powerful Greek-speaking Orthodox Christian minority. The region is historically known as Epirus, which makes up a good part of southern Albania and north-western Greece. Its history is emblematic of the rich interweaving of cultural, economic and social ties that have characterized this area of the Mediterranean for millennia and which can be seen in the architectural and artistic traces found in Butrint, a real melting pot of civilizations that for so long have flourished and converged in the area. The crisis and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire led to the division of the region between the two nation states, Greece and Albania, at the beginning of the twentieth century, and they consolidated their independence in this period. At the same time,

both countries began recriminations in contested territories that they each previously controlled but which now fell under the control of the other. It is not the purpose of my analysis to elaborate further on this issue, but it is important to recall how the influx of settlers and internal migrants from every part of Albania took place here, where Ksamil would be built. If in the socialist era the cooperative's creation can be seen as a strategy used by Tirana to create a devoted settlement to control this border area, then after the collapse of the regime the lack of deep local roots for Ksamil inhabitants and the impossibility of claiming an ancestral bond with its lands made its population particularly mobile compared to those of the surrounding settlements (Nitsiakos 2010).

The houses Ilias mentioned are still standing. The 'four buildings' (*qatër palatet*), as they are familiarly called, are on the main street that runs through Ksamil. The other sixteen constitute the backbone of the town, stretching from the 'lower centre' to the sea. They are four storeys tall, flaking and yellowing with age. They almost disappear amid the recent constructions all around them. The landscape we see in photos taken during the cooperative is quite different, with the blocks of flats grouped in a sea of green fruit trees on terraced hills.

Some of the inhabitants who moved into the apartment blocks on their arrival in Ksamil still live there. Among them is Lena, now employed by the municipality as a gardener:

I arrived in Ksamil with my husband in 1984. The work was good, you would start at seven in the morning and finish at two in the afternoon. Then until five o'clock we were free. From five onwards there were soldiers and you couldn't even look at the sea. We all had to participate in the patrols of the coast together with the soldiers. There were all the lights and the control towers. In 1987 I remember that there was a great escape by boat and the chief of the guards was replaced. To come here there were many limitations. Our relatives also needed a special visa to visit us. In Tirana it took three days to get it and there were many obstacles, so few could get here. Those who frequently managed to get here were the tourists and the members of the delegations who went to Butrint. They also stopped to see us working and we were afraid when they pointed at us with cameras, as we did not know if we could stay or we had to leave!

The memories of the lack of freedom are intertwined with those of organizing daily activities. Toni, the owner of the bar-restaurant that serves as a meeting place for Butrint archaeologists, recalls life in a cooperative in these terms:

I arrived in Ksamil from Korça in 1971 during military service. At that time there was nothing, only the woods. For the first three years only soldiers lived here. They were the ones who did the first job of clearing the ground. Then in 1974 they left and were

replaced by civilians. In that year the first thirty-six families came, and my wife also joined me. Until 1985 there were also groups of *akcionistët* (activists/volunteers) who came from schools and universities. I can tell you mostly about them, since until 1979 I played the role of coordinator of activities (*akcion*) in the Ksamil cooperative. The actions were very well planned and lasted throughout the summer, from June to September. First the younger students came, then the high school students and finally the university students who had finished their exams. The stakeholders got up at six o'clock, did half an hour of gymnastics and then I had to put them in rows and divide them according to the various brigades that would take care of different tasks. There were two work shifts, the first from six to eleven in the morning, the second from three to six in the afternoon, eight hours in all. After work, the activists had a recreational cultural programme. During communism, to enter Ksamil there was a checkpoint. I had a passport that gave me the right to enter the border area, but for example my parents had to go to the Ministry, apply for a visa and could only enter and exit Ksamil by day. Tourists who went to Butrint were also stopped at the checkpoint. A soldier came up to check and they were not free to move in the cooperative. Besides, we had orders not to talk to foreigners. The population living in the border areas were trustworthy people, we were all armed because it was said that the Albanian army was the people. I only remember one episode, in 1985, when two border guards fled by swimming towards Corfu. All of Ksamil was surrounded by tunnels and bunkers, so it wasn't easy to escape from here.

Ksamil is a fine example of what the geographer Dean S. Rugg (1994) has called the 'socialist landscape', with its terraces, reclaimed fields, channelled waters and bunkers. If the first elements aspire to the 'autarchic modernization' that was pursued by the Enver Hoxha regime by imposing great sacrifices on the Albanian population, the bunkers are the most striking symbol of the borders of the Socialist Republic of Albania in the last two decades of its history. Between the 1970s and 1980s, when Albania was completely isolated after breaking with the Soviet Union and China, the communist government launched a great campaign of 'bunkerization' in the country, which led to the construction of tens of thousands of reinforced concrete bunkers in every corner of the territory, but in particular along the coastline and in the border areas (Stefa and Mydyti 2012). The bunkers became the subject of controversy and myths over time, starting with their actual number (probably about six hundred thousand, one for every four resident citizens). They became a tourist curiosity and a source of inspiration for postcards and souvenirs after the fall of communism and have recently been used as museum exhibits and the subjects of artistic reinvention. But until 1991, the bunkers visually represented the Albanian 'border regime', performing an explicit and implicit function. On the one hand, they represent the regime, as a defensive military garrison for protecting the nation. On the other, they act as a deterrent to all Albanians to carry out any attempt to flee the country. To this end, the bunkers were actually built with no attempt to be hidden, camouflaged or protected, but were rather arranged

to be as visible as possible to Albanian citizens, constantly reminding them of the presence and control of the state according to the totalitarian logic of the regime (Galaty, Stocker and Watkinson 2009). In the words of Hoxha himself, the political and economic independence of the nation would only have been possible if all Albanians had lived and worked 'as if they were always under siege' (Hoxha 1977: 72).

Studying the specific case of the Ksamil bunkers, Emily Glass (2017) highlighted how, with the end of the communist government in Albania and more generally of the Cold War, the bunkers entered a long phase of abandonment that disguised their original function and transformed them into a part of the Albanian landscape. Although not removed due to the difficulty and expense involved, the 'mushrooms' (as they are popularly called) have been reinvented and used for other purposes. Those who found them on their land or near their homes, for example, have started to use them as warehouses, stores, sheds for work tools or shelters for their animals. In other cases, especially for those on the beaches, the bunkers have been converted into bars and restaurants, or transformed into food stores. In short, the inhabitants of Ksamil have learned to relate to this element of the landscape in ways that have subverted the bunkers' original function. Children play hide-and-seek, young people meet for their clandestine encounters, many throw garbage and rubbish into them and leave traces on the outside with writings, drawings and graffiti.

With their history and their subsequent transformations, the bunkers of Ksamil have therefore recorded the transformational events of a village that went from being a 'cooperative model' of socialism to an experimental laboratory of the new economic practices of capitalism and the free market, from a bastion of the militarized border of the regime to a launching pad for international migration routes and an area of passage for tourist flows. As Toni sums up in the conclusion to his story:

Ksamil worked well as a cooperative until 1990, before it became a farm from 1992 to 1996 under the management of a private company. After 1997 everything has been destroyed. Many of those who had worked in the cooperative emigrated, and even the person who had directed it since 1981 went to Greece, where he died last year. My children also emigrated, one to Greece and the other to London, but I never wanted to leave. I opened a small shop, then I enlarged it into a convenience store and finally I added the bar and the rooms for rent. I think that the future of Ksamil can only be tourism.

Transnational Post-Socialist Villagers

I remember when I used to come to Ksamil as a boy in the 1980s to see my aunts and uncles, who worked in the cooperative. I was struck by the beam of the military searchlights sweeping the beach and the sea at night, and coming through the window in my bedroom . . . In the late 1990s I moved here too, and now in the evenings I still see a light going round lighting up both sea and sky, and coming through my bedroom window: the discotheque light!

Smirald laughs at the comparison and shakes his head. Yet his words encapsulate the extraordinary changes that have taken place in the village in less than two decades. In 1991 there were 417 families in Ksamil made up of 1,900 inhabitants. The population of the village had been kept under control for twenty years and was planned and regulated to meet the needs of the cooperative. No one could move to the village or live there without the necessary permits. Memories of propaganda about this ‘new garden on the shores of the Ionian’, the pleasant climate and relative affluence of the village thanks to the success of the cooperative along with its proximity to the Greek border all made Ksamil an ideal, much yearned-for destination for those leaving the country. While tens of thousands of Albanians sailed off to what had once been forbidden foreign countries, hundreds instead settled down in what had once been the equally forbidden model village of Ksamil. The population almost doubled in ten years: 5,103 in 1997, 6,673 in 2002, 8,301 in 2005, 9,133 in 2008 (Komuna Ksamil 2010).

The most interesting aspect of this phenomenal growth rate is the extreme diversity of those who have moved to Ksamil. While the neighbouring districts of Tepelenë, Skrapar and Korça have continued to be the predominant places from which people have moved, there are families in the town who have come from every corner of the country, including distant cities in the north. Just as the volunteers came from every area of Albania to build Ksamil in the 1970s, the migratory chains of the 1990s have involved all districts in the country. When we analyse the provenance of the 2,500 families who live in Ksamil, we see how the variety of districts corresponds to an even greater variety of origins within each district: the inhabitants of the town come from over 480 different localities. From big cities down to the smallest villages, from the extreme north to the extreme south – it seems that there is no district that has not provided the village with at least one family. The composition of the population of Ksamil clearly shows how internal mobility is one of the most significant phenomena of post-communist Albania (Vullnetari 2007).

During the communist regime, internal mobility in the country had been strictly controlled. Precise administrative restrictions were developed through laws and decrees to form a real ‘anti-migration system’ that provided,

among other things, 'internal passports' which people had to carry with them, to plan the distribution of the workforce and the place of residence of the workers (Sjöberg 1994). At the same time, as we have seen in the Ksamil cooperative, groups of workers were installed in new, small agricultural and industrial centres built near particular economic activities such as mining, electricity production, or to support reclamation works, terraces and the planting of new agricultural crops. Between 1945 and 1990, they created a total of forty-one new settlements, both in the mountainous areas of the hinterland and on the coast. The ideology that implied the political control of internal migration during this period is well reflected in the terminology used in official discourses on this subject. The definition of 'mechanical movement' (*lëvizje mekanike*) alluded to migration as a phenomenon that was not natural. Internal migration was in fact legalized and recognized as an inalienable right of all Albanian citizens only in 1993, through an amendment to the Constitution that recognized the right of every citizen to choose their place of residence and to move freely within the national territory (Vullnetari 2007).

Albania's recent history clearly shows the close link between internal and international migration. In total, between 1992 and 2002, an average of 150,000 people migrated internally to Albania each year, which means a movement of over 1,350,000 people during this period (Bërxfholi 2005), equivalent to 40 percent of the Albanian population in the year 2000. Internal mobility has often been a prerequisite for international mobility, leading to a progressive depopulation of internal and mountainous areas (especially in the northeast) and a concentration of the population in the plains around the large urban centres (Tirana and Durrës) and in the central and southern coastal areas, from which it would be easier to lay the foundations for a migratory route by land or sea to other countries.

In Ksamil, the arrival of internal migrants during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s gave rise to new blocks of houses and districts, expanding the town and giving its areas new identities. When we look at the layout of the settlements, considering the provenance and year of arrival of the inhabitants, it is possible to reconstruct the particular 'immigration geography' which makes the apparently chaotic and random structure of the town more logical. Upon arrival, it seems a haphazard and unchecked development, but the map drawn by Elton (see Figure 2.2) indicates that it is more orderly than it seems. The various sectors of the town, which are aligned along the main street, are characterized by the two fundamental coordinates of space (represented by the district of provenance of the residents in the built-up areas) and of time (the year of settlement). Even with no other landmarks, it is these references that mark out and institutionalize the topography of Ksamil. And without street names and other points of

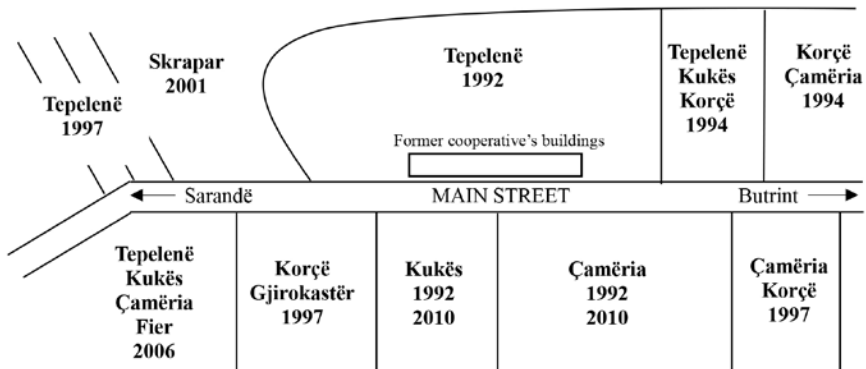


FIGURE 2.2. The map of Ksamil drawn by Elton. Digital elaboration by the author.
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reference, it is these parameters linked to immigration that order the space and constitute Ksamil's 'migratory landscape'.

'Ksamil is a sort of Albania in miniature,' says Vesel Koçiu, the mayor of the town. According to his testimony:

The village population is extremely varied. Being the mayor of people who came from so many different places, and especially from rural and mountainous areas, is a real challenge. Every group is represented in the municipal council, but the real difficulty in Ksamil is not peaceful coexistence so much as providing infrastructures and services for everyone.

The situation on the ground is far more complex and conflicting than the mayor's idealized image might suggest. Mechanisms of affiliation and identity based on regions of origin play an important role in the management of local power. And the political sphere, which the mayor portrays as an ideal arena for democratic participation, is actually dominated by the largest regional group made up of people who come from the district of Tepelenë. Ever since the municipality was set up in 1996, every mayor of Ksamil, of whichever party, has always been first and foremost 'from Tepelenë'. Smirald, son of immigrants from Çamëria, is in no doubt:

There'll be a real electoral contest in Ksamil only when the people from Tepelenë will have to choose between two candidates from Tepelenë! Until then it's simple . . . they vote *en masse*, without even looking at the party!

Regional backgrounds also explain some town-planning decisions. For example, inhabitants not originally from Tepelenë reproach the mayor for having 'forgotten' the town centre and having spent all the money on doing up the Ksamil district where 'all those from Tepelenë' live, along with the

mayor himself. 'Here the streets have no names,' concludes Smirald, 'except where the mayor's friends live. There the street is called rruga Ali Pasha Tepelenë, in honour of their local hero. And have you seen the street? They even have solar-powered lamps, like in Europe. While the streets in the centre don't have any lighting at all! If these aren't privileges. . . .'

The arrival of thousands of people from all over Albania was considered a traumatic experience by the original inhabitants of the cooperative, who in a short time saw the natural, human and social landscape of Ksamil change dramatically. This happened to Tani, who runs a mini-market full of parasols, plastic beach toys, beach sandals and swimming costumes. Over the door he has hoisted a fine Kosovo flag to attract passing tourists:

I was born here in Ksamil in 1983. I spent my childhood playing with the other children from the cooperative, and all I remember is the sea and the smell of citrus fruits. Then, after 1990, the others started arriving – hundreds, thousands of people from the north and from the mountains. There were days when dozens of families arrived all together, and they would set up camp in the orchards and olive groves, then they would start putting up shacks – and they never left. They started cutting the trees, the orange and lemon trees, and just carried on until there wasn't a single one left! Ksamil today is no longer my Ksamil.

The key issue for all immigrants in Ksamil over the past twenty years has always been the purchase and possession of land. At the heart of the success – and tragedy – of Ksamil is the ambiguous status of the land that originally formed the cooperative and which has now been almost entirely urbanized. The problem of land ownership occurs in all of Albania and is crucial for any question concerning tourism. If anything, it is even more significant and complex in the case of Ksamil. Since there were neither settlements nor farming before the 1970s, nobody could claim possession of the land prior to the collectivization process of the communist period. The entire area was reclaimed, cultivated and terraced during the years of the cooperative. So, in one way, the situation in Ksamil was simpler than elsewhere in 1991. However, the influx of internal immigrants immediately after the fall of the communist system, and the consequent appropriation of land within and beyond the confines of the cooperative, made the process of assigning properties much more complex. The problem of the olive groves, which stretched across the slopes of the terraced hills, was solved without too much difficulty by assigning each cooperative worker a plot containing ten trees. The citrus orchards, however, were more of a problem because by 1994 the situation on the plain had already been compromised by the construction of dozens of new homes and the settlement of hundreds of immigrants. There were no former owners and the cooperative land belonged to the state, so when the communist state ceased to exist, it was easier in Ksamil

than elsewhere for incomers to obtain land and start building shacks and houses to lay claim to a particular plot.

Gjergji, the owner of the largest construction materials store in Ksamil, tells me what happened when the first waves of immigrants started arriving:

In the 1990s there was plenty of unused land. They just came here, put down a few stones to mark out the land they wanted and then slept in a shelter under a tree. Then they gradually built a fence to mark out the plot and they cut down a few trees and put up a shack where they could live. Later on, as soon as they had some money, they would build the foundations, the pillars and a roof – the rudiments of a house, let's say – and visible proof that would also last through a period of emigration, so that nobody else could take the land. Then, of course, with the money they earned abroad, they could go ahead with building the rest of the house, but far more slowly.

Gazmend, who came to Ksamil from Tepelenë in 1997, did just this: 'When I arrived, my brother-in-law was already here and he'd taken a large plot of land. He said: take these four stones and mark out the plot you want. So I put down the stones at the four corners of the land where our house stands today'.

This insistence on the 'four stones to mark out the land' is neither coincidental nor metaphorical, for it dates back to a custom regulated by a section of the *kanun*, the common-law code that has been the subject of countless anthropological analyses (Resta 1997). Without state laws to regulate property issues in a commonly accepted manner, as in the rest of Albania, the people in Ksamil made wide use of the precise guidelines laid down by the *kanun* to establish and recognize boundaries. In particular, the ancient code establishes that:

The boundary stone has witnesses around it. There are six or twelve small rocks, which are buried in the earth around the boundary stone. When boundaries are fixed, the Elders of the village must also be present and as many young people and children as possible so that the boundary will be retained in memory. Every tract of land, whether field or meadow, garden or vineyard, small forest or copse, woodland or pasture . . . or village – all are divided by boundaries. Someone who wishes to set a boundary or restore a forgotten one must take and bear on his shoulder a rock and a clod of earth . . . and fix the new boundary. . . . When the Elder has set the boundary, he must place his hand on it and say: 'If anyone moves this stone, may he be burdened with it in the next life! . . .'. The boundaries between lands cannot be moved. Once the boundaries have been set, they are never moved again. (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 74)

Especially for its system of vendetta, the *kanun* has often been described as a threat to law and order, though the statements gathered in Ksamil show how in these cases it has proved to be a useful collection of rules for avoiding or solving disputes concerning land ownership, which is an issue of great relevance in post-communist Albania. Numerous ambiguities and

contradictions have naturally arisen, and with ever greater consequences, in Ksamil. The system, which is respected and makes sense for the community that created it, is also subject to misuses, especially when external agents are involved. Elton continues:

You can be sure that when a foreigner arrives and wants to buy a plot of land, he will find himself buying the same plot at least two or three times from as many owners all of whom lay claim to it. There have been some large international groups, such as Club Med, which have abandoned their projects in Albania because they've found it impossible to secure ownership of a plot of land.

The entire system began to fall apart when Ksamil tried to approve the first town-planning schemes and thus abandon its precarious status as an 'informal settlement'. The introduction, albeit very late, of a new legislative and bureaucratic apparatus clashed with the customary rules that had somehow regulated the management of land and property in the early years of Ksamil's post-socialist expansion. The logic of the new legal order struggled to impose itself in the village, first generating forms of negotiation and then of resistance. For example, the classification of land as with or without planning permission led owners of unusable land to start disposing of their less valuable properties to the detriment of newcomers. Then, as we will see in the next section, it reached a point of dramatic 'reckoning' with the launch of the government campaign to 'clean the coast' of all cases of building fraud.

Emigrants' (Guest)Houses

When you walk through Ksamil, you can clearly see that you are passing through a cluster of houses rather than a real town. There are barely any public buildings, squares, public and recreational spaces, shops or services. Houses rise up everywhere. They are generally large, having three or four floors, and only rarely are they complete. The decoration and finishing are missing and the plasterwork is only roughly applied. The place is dominated by grey reinforced concrete, with steel rods sticking out from the top floors and from the pillars, fences and balconies. Building material stores (*materiali ndertimi*) abound in Ksamil. Those who work in the building sector understand the recent history of Ksamil. Ermal is the owner of one of the stores there and his observations about how migrants behave in relation to construction work are indeed very interesting:

We arrived here in Ksamil from Tepelenë in 1996. Then my two sons and I emigrated to Greece, where we worked as bricklayers. In 2005 we came back and started up our own business, at the height of the housing boom. In recent years, people came

to us practically only for cement and iron – the materials needed for building not a real house, but the skeleton of a house. A family often builds two or three of these skeletons, simply to occupy the land, knowing that in actual fact it'll take years and years to build real homes. Then, when they're finished, each child will have a house of their own. Bear in mind that the average house here in Ksamil takes about ten or fifteen years to build. This is because the money that goes into them is earned abroad and it takes years and years to accumulate earnings and savings.

Here we need to examine the close link between migration and urbanization, and the particular effect this interaction has had on the landscape in Ksamil. When almost all the buildings in an urban area are still being constructed, and take an average of ten years or more to complete, we can possibly talk of an 'interrupted landscape' to describe a place in a perennial state of anthropization, in which various elements of aggregation and disaggregation come together and overlap. In Ksamil, one can clearly observe a typical environment of the so-called 'post-post-communist' phase of many former Socialist Bloc countries. It starts with works from the initial communist period (terracing, fish farming), the ruins of the late communist period (the rusting irrigation system, abandoned land-reclamation pumps, the faded lettering on the stalls of the cooperative), post-communist works (new houses under construction, paved roads, concrete piers and artificial beaches) and post-communist ruins (demolished illegal buildings, piles of garbage, the remains of bankrupt cafés and restaurants and the open-air drainage from the houses). With their conflicting centripetal and centrifugal forces, these four levels of order and disorder convey present-day Ksamil's potential and its limits as a tourist and seaside resort.

To understand these links, we must grasp the pervasive effects of migration on Albania and, in particular, on Ksamil since the 1990s. Half of the population of the village is currently abroad. Of the 9,000 inhabitants registered in the municipality of Ksamil, fewer than 5,000 live there permanently. The rest are working abroad, almost all of them in nearby Greece, and either return to Ksamil only for short periods, mainly in the summer, or they do not return at all for years on end. It is very hard to calculate the exact number of people who have emigrated, in part because monthly figures vary considerably.

Anthropologists have been confronting the issues of globalization for decades, and since the 1990s have advanced our understanding of migration processes in the global world through what has come to be known as 'transnationalism'. Although this paradigm has established itself as an attempt to analyse international networks beyond and across borders, the most interesting ethnographic level to study was the 'translocal' scale, rather than the transnational one. This means that the exchanges and relations in the economic, social, affective and political sphere that transmigrants cultivate

between contexts of departure, arrival, transit and return act as networks that connect cities, villages, neighbourhoods and people. The Indian anthropologist and writer Amitav Ghosh offered us, for example, the portrait of the 'transnational villagers' encountered during his research in northern Egypt. He had mistakenly assumed these would be isolated and 'immobile' in their traditions, but the inhabitants were actually always waiting to leave for one of their periodic trips between the countries of the Gulf, Libya, Jordan, Syria and Europe (Ghosh 1992). Ksamil is clearly 'rooted in mobility'. Taking up the well-known formulation proposed by Peggy Levitt (2001) in her study on Dominican transmigrants in Boston, the inhabitants of Ksamil can be defined as 'transnational villagers', forming migratory paths while producing financial and social remittances in post-socialist Albania.

Like the seminal study conducted by Cristina Szanton Blanc (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994) on transnational migration between the United States and rural villages in the Philippines, the study of housing and real estate investments of transmigrants has proved to be one of the richest strands of research in this field. As has been noted in many ethnographic contexts, the most significant share of remittances sent by those who work abroad is allocated to the houses. Earning money to renovate the family home or to build a new one is one of the most common reasons for emigration, which adds to the symbolic meanings that gather around the 'houses of emigrants', often easily recognizable in the context of rural villages or grouped into specific neighbourhoods within cities. In Chapter 5 we will focus on some further aspects of home-making processes and the homing of migrants, highlighting how many affective, emotional, value and social dimensions are intertwined with the material practice of 'homing' abroad. Here, however, I would like to focus on some links between house construction, family relationships and mobility strategies that allow us to better understand what happens in Ksamil.

One comparison reminds me of field research that I conducted in the Republic of Moldova, in Pirlîța, a transnational village characterized by strong female migration connected to care work in Italy. I was able to observe how emigration has led to the development of an architectural style called 'euro-stil'. It is a 'European style', which sums up the ideals of modernity, cleanliness, comfort and aesthetics that have been picked up by migrants during their experiences abroad. In Pirlîța, house renovations in the 'European style' reflect a parallel 'restructuring' of affective relations and the organization of family life among migrants and their relatives, particularly for female emancipation and the negotiations for managing familial financial resources (Vietti 2010).

The Italian anthropologist Carlo Capello (2008) noted that for Khouribga, a city in Morocco known for its high rate of emigration to Europe, the houses

of migrants are characterized as being very 'extroverted'. In this case, ethnography has highlighted how the attention and investments of the owners are mainly focused on the external aspects of the houses, with less care for the interiors. Reversing the traditional architectural model of the area (with most others having simple, sober exteriors), the eclectic and striking facades of emigrant houses can translate their economic capital into symbolic capital, communicating to fellow citizens and returning migrants the success of their migration and the well-being achieved thanks to their work abroad.

Also worthy of mention is Giuseppe Grimaldi's (2019) interpretation of the role of 'houses of the diaspora' as 'mobility infrastructures'. He studied Mikelle, the capital of the regional state of Tigray, in northeast Ethiopia. These Tigray migrant houses, apparently built in anticipation of the 'return home' of their owners, often become 'non-return' houses as the buildings perform other functions. In most cases, after being empty for a certain period of time, they are rented to other people in the local community, who, although never migrating from their home country, can benefit from a social advancement linked to internal mobility towards districts that are considered prestigious.

Keeping in mind these different interpretations for the homes of migrants, we can now turn attention back to the (guest)houses of Ksamil.

Here the houses built by migrants reflect a precise symbolic representation of the family structure of those who inhabited them, as well as of the town's pursuit of tourism. Counting the storeys of each building gives one an idea of the number of children who live there, or who intend to live there once they return from abroad. One floor for each child, to which another one is added for renting out rooms to tourists: this is the basic structure around the design of dwellings in Ksamil. Walking through the town, one cannot help but notice that there are no small houses in Ksamil, only dwellings of considerable size. Elton notes:

This is the only secure form of investment in Albania. Nobody trusts banks with their money, and businesses run the risk of failure even though many people certainly do try. I, for example, used to think about opening a car wash . . . that's it: once you've bought your car, there's nothing else to invest in other than a home. Here in Ksamil, all the men who live in Greece are earning money for their houses. If the family has two or three children, they all work to help pay for the building and then, since we've got beaches here and lots of tourists, everyone wants to build a room or two for rental, so that they can earn money during the summer . . . don't you think that's a good form of investment?

Therefore, what matters in Ksamil is not the style or aesthetic value of the building, but the space it offers, the size of the investment and the profit that can be made from it. There are no architects in Ksamil; the families

themselves decide the layout and the builders do the rest. 'That's why our houses are so square-cut: it's as though they were made with a ruler!' concludes Elton.

Unlike the 'extroverted' houses in Morocco or the 'European style' ones in Moldavia, the main focus in Ksamil is solidity: this is a reflection of the solidity of the family and of its roots in the town. Ksamil families are families of migrants who came from elsewhere and many have since gone elsewhere, but in their houses they find a sort of permanence, a foothold in the village. Rather than spend their money on attractive ornaments, those who can afford it prefer to build castles and towers of stone to symbolize their occupancy of the space and the defence of their own family unit.

About three thousand homes have been built in Ksamil since the early 1990s, but as the municipal administration itself admits, less than half have the necessary paperwork required for building and habitability. This administrative irregularity turned Ksamil into a giant 'informal settlement' and ultimately led to the sensational 'clean-up campaign' which in May 2010 involved the demolition of three hundred houses in the town.

Even though there had long been talk of government action to end unauthorized building, in the spring of 2010 there were no particular signs to suggest what was about to take place in Ksamil in early May. Mondì, who runs one of the petrol stations in town, recalls:

They came one morning, with the army and police. They put a security cordon around Ksamil and then started moving through the town, house by house, marking those that were to be demolished. It was terrible! They stayed here for two weeks knocking down houses with bulldozers, earthmovers and pneumatic drills . . . When they left, Ksamil was reduced to the state you see it in now! Not even the war, not even the Nazis did so much damage in Albania. I've never seen anything like it – three hundred homes destroyed. And it's not finished yet! They said they'll be back in the autumn to finish knocking down the houses where people live – those who still have a room to live in! What an outrage! Ksamil has never recovered since then. Tourism is back at 2005 levels but the real driver of the economy, construction, has come to a halt. Migrants are no longer investing. I know five families whose homes have been destroyed and who've already decided that they'll never come back. They'll continue living in Greece. What else can they do? They've lost everything – here they have just a pile of rubble.

The choice to demolish houses was based on time factors rather than quality concerns, choosing the approval date of Law 9402 'On Legalisation, Urban Planning, and the Integration of Illegal Buildings', which was passed by the Albanian parliament in May 2006 as the criterion for selection. This law explicitly stated that buildings on which construction work had already started when it came into effect could be legalized, while all those that were built at a later date without the necessary permits would be demolished, a

method of intervention that immediately sparked off suspicions, jealousies and corruption. As Smirald complains:

If they'd adopted a clear, credible criterion, everything would have been different, and the demolitions would also have been useful. To give an example: it had been known for years that buildings were to be constructed only on the left-hand side of the main road, but not on the right where the sea and the beaches are. That's it – if they'd knocked down the houses by the sea and let the others stand, it would have been more reasonable, but on that side, there were also buildings constructed by very powerful people in Ksamil – people who could put big money on the table, with powerful friends. So the buildings on the sea remain standing and the little ones on the other side have been destroyed.

Gjion, a shepherd from Tepelenë, owns a small butcher's shop on the ground floor of his home. He recalls, in these words, 'the worst day of his whole life':

Look what's happened to my shop! And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. In May they came and told me my house would be demolished. They started work and destroyed the first three walls of the shop. I was weeping, trying to explain that my house was in order, begging them not to demolish it. So they checked their map once again and realized that my house had been there since before 2006. They apologised for their mistake and told me to put in a request to the state for compensation, and that everything would be paid for.

Even though he suffered a serious loss, Gjion did manage to save the three floors of his home above his gutted shop. The house belonging to the Mirdita family next door met a very different fate; it was reduced to a pile of rubble. The family, who are living temporarily in the only habitable room left, have a very different view of the events in May from that of their shepherd neighbour:

The only difference between us and them is that we had less money to give to the police. The others managed to stop the demolition by handing over all their savings, while we had just built the second floor and had nothing left to stop it from going ahead. In September they'll be back to complete the job, and we'll have to leave. It's not fair; everything that's been done is just one big injustice.

These different accounts of the demolitions are another indication of the lack of cohesion in Ksamil society over the past decades. The city administration built the first monument in Ksamil to celebrate the solidarity uniting its inhabitants – a mosaic in the centre of the town which depicts a handshake. Mondri considers this monument to be nothing but a lie:

Ksamil is not a real village. The people here don't feel they're part of the community. There's no solidarity. It's true that there have never been clashes, but when the



FIGURE 2.3. Collapsed house, still inhabited, Ksamil, 2010. © Francesco Vietti

moment of truth came, nobody did anything to help each other and save the village. If we'd been in Mursia or Vrinë, where the Greeks are, all the inhabitants would have joined hands forming a human chain around the village and they'd have defended their homes all together. But here people just look after their own interests – it's every man for himself.

The 'clean-up campaign' undoubtedly caused enormous economic harm to many inhabitants in Ksamil and to the community as a whole. In summer 2010, the piles of rubble at every street corner were a constant reminder of the millions of euros lost by residents. Amidst the disaster, some imagined that this turning point could change Ksamil for the better. Smirald, for example, harboured this hope:

If the politicians and inhabitants realize that the only possible future for the village is to become a real holiday resort, where it's pleasant to spend a few days or weeks, then this disaster will have had a positive effect. In place of the destroyed homes, it will be necessary to plant trees, make squares with fountains, put in benches and amusements for children, open shops and restaurants and fix the roads.

I returned to Ksamil in 2013, 2014 and one last time in 2021. Each time I found the city bigger, more crowded, more chaotic. Unfortunately, in the decade following the 'clean-up campaign', Smirald's optimistic vision seems not to have been realized. Instead, the cynical prophecy made by Astrit, a former mayor of Ksamil, has found full confirmation:

The houses were destroyed in order to free up the land. The place had become packed out, so they decided to clear out a few plots. In a few months' time, businessmen will certainly be here, buying up land on the cheap – after all, it's worthless now. They'll clear away the rubble and put up some big buildings or hotels. I bet they'll find a way to declare them legal.

Dhoma Me Qera (Rooms to Let)

So far I have traced a collective history of Ksamil, describing how migration flows, landscape, the economy and tourism have changed over the years. I will now focus on the biographical experience of one of the 2,500 families living in the village to see how these aspects have influenced their parental and emotional relationships, their economic management and the meaning attributed to the construction of their house.

Elton's family offers us a good representation of the socio-economic situation of the majority of Ksamil's inhabitants. The family of six, the parents and four children, arrived from Tepelenë in 1999, with two of the children having now emigrated to Greece. The family live in a house which is under construction, but close to completion, and rent rooms to tourists. His father, Gazmend, is a bricklayer and works in the construction sector of Ksamil after spending many years living and working in Greece. His mother, Leda, takes care of the house and the vegetable garden. Vjora, the only daughter, is a teacher in a primary school in Gjirokastër. Of the three sons, two are in Greece, Edi and Clirim, where they work as bricklayers and waiters on the island of Zakynthos. The youngest son, Elton, studies economics at the University of Saranda.

The family has a rather complex kinship characterized by a strong dispersion due to the migrations made by many family members. The paternal kin are native to Zhulaj, a small village in the Tepelenë district, while the maternal kin come from the nearby village of Bukaj. Both internal and international migration have contributed to the dispersal of the family over the past two generations. Until the early 1950s, the two families all resided in the two villages of origin. The first generation to experience internal mobility was that of Elton's parents. Gazmend's sister moved to Gjirokastër following her marriage, while Leda's seven brothers and sisters moved for work or marriage to Tirana, Fier, Tepelenë and Vlorë. These were internal mobility forms typical of the socialist period when the productive needs of the economic system and the strong process of urbanization accentuated the opportunities to leave or forcefully abandon the rural villages in which they were born.

However, it was the last generation, the one that grew up in the late 1980s and 1990s, that widely experienced international mobility and took the path

of emigration abroad. Today fourteen of Elton's cousins live abroad, twenty-three in Albanian cities and only five still reside where they were born.

Listening to the story of Gazmend, Elton's father, one can begin to reconstruct the history of the family and its many migrations:

My father had four hectares of land, sixty olive trees, thirty sheep and goats, a bull and a donkey. When the cooperative was created in 1957, he gave everything to the state and began working in the mechanics' brigade. After finishing school, I left for two years of military service, and when I returned, since my mother was now old, she had decided to marry off her only son. Having long sought the bride in nearby villages, my mother found the right person, the daughter of family friends who lived in the village of Bukaj, whose cousin was married to my cousin. It was the year 1978.

After his marriage to Leda, Gazmend worked on the construction of the Durrës-Elbasan railway together with teams of Chinese workers and engineers, and in an industrial company in Tepelenë. Their four children were born during the 1980s. The Italian tourists who now stay in the rooms of Elton's family home in Ksamil perhaps wonder why the walls do not have pictures of the Albanian Riviera or Corfu, but instead pretty pictures of the beauties of another Greek island famous for its tourism: Zakynthos.

The answer is in the story that Gazmend recalls:

Life in the village for my children was very hard. The school was forty minutes away on foot and there was no other job but being a shepherd. So when Albania opened up to the world, I decided to go to work in Greece, where I had acquaintances. I left in 1995 and stayed until 2002. I worked in Patras and then in Zakynthos and with the money I earned I started to build the new house in Ksamil. In 1996 my eldest son also came with me to Greece, then the second one joined us. Now I am back, while they are still living in Zakynthos. Even there, life is very hard, especially because of the distance from home and family.

Elton, as a youngest son (*djali i plëqërise*, the 'son of old age'), was assigned the task of staying at home with his parents, so he would sometimes see his brothers and sister leave:

When our father left in 1995 he decided that the oldest brother would take care of the sheep. Since we had only twenty sheep, it was decided to give them to our uncle, our mother's brother, who already had a hundred, and to send our brother to live with his uncle and be a shepherd. It went on for a few months, although my brother was not happy because his uncle's village was two hours away on foot and he could only come home for two days a week. And then you know, Zhulaj is right next to the road that leads to the border of Kakavjë with Greece. In those years, every day people who emigrated passed through the village and would avoid the police on the main road by crossing the villages. So my brother would talk to those who went to Greece every day and they would tell him that everything there was beautiful and that they made a lot of money. And so I think that he became influenced by them and began to

dream of leaving and becoming rich himself. So, one Saturday, Klodi, after returning home, took a few sweaters more than usual, asked for two sweets to take to his uncle's family, which he never did, and said: I'm going to uncle! But the next day his uncle called to find out why Klodi hadn't come. Everyone had gotten very concerned, especially because my brother and cousin had also disappeared. Soon, however, it was discovered that the ten thousand drachmas he had earned in Greece and brought to the village had also disappeared from his uncle's house, and so everyone understood that the two had fled to Greece. For six days my brother and cousin gave no news, then finally called: they were in Thessalonica, emigrating! They had walked three days and three nights through the woods and mountains to cross the border, and they had made it! In any case, they stayed there very little: only twelve days. Then the Greek police took them and sent them back to Albania. My brother, as soon as he got home, said he would try and leave again, so my father decided to take him with him. They both went to Zakynthos, where they did all the work they could find. For the first weeks they slept outdoors, under the olive trees, then slowly they settled down.

The father, throughout the period of emigration, returned to Albania once every three or four months for a week, carrying with him the money he'd earned to start and continue the construction of the house of Ksamil. In 2004 his second son also emigrated to Zakynthos to be a plumber and waiter.

The big brother has now found a job in the tourism industry, he works as a bartender in a nightclub, and he's all set up with paperwork so he can come home from time to time. Instead, his little brother is still in hiding and has never been able to return. Life there is difficult because the Greeks are very racist. Anyway, my brothers can make a thousand, a thousand and five hundred euros a month. They live together in a small room for rent and so they manage to send almost everything home. So we were able to build our entire three-storey house and the roof. This year, with the crisis in Greece, work has decreased a lot and so Klodi is thinking of returning home.

The father's emigration to Greece and return to Albania, along with the two sons who are still abroad, have allowed Elton's family to build the new house in Ksamil where tourists are staying. They have also earned enough to furnish it appropriately and to buy a car for the family, as well as to accompany tourists on visits to the most interesting sites in the area. Each choice was weighted in order to raise the quality of the family's life and also to improve the hospitality and tourist services that the family could offer.

This delicate interweaving between family interests and tourist considerations is particularly visible in how the house was built. Luckily, when I was doing field research, Elton's family were able to raise the roof of the house they had been building for ten years. This is a moment of strong symbolic and material value, which also shows off their success to the community. Raising the Albanian flag on the highest point of the roof and displaying the typical apotropaic objects to ward off bad luck contribute to a festive

atmosphere, and the whole family can now host congratulatory visits from friends, relatives and acquaintances. As Elton recounts:

The whole family has contributed, my parents, my brothers and myself, we have invested everything we have earned in these years. Basically every brother contributed to a floor. Now the second and third floors are still to be decorated and there are doors and windows to install and all the furniture to buy. At first we thought that when my brothers returned everyone would live in a flat with his family. But the second brother has already said that he does not want to live here again, so when the third floor is finished it will be for tourists. We have already added the rooms and bathrooms to make them independent mini-apartments to rent.

From this point of view, Elton's family home fits the category of 'mobility infrastructure' like the houses of the Ethiopian diaspora studied by Grimaldi (2019). Although originally designed to welcome the return of emigrant children, the rooms of the house ended up welcoming tourists and allowing the economic and social upward mobility of Elton's family. While waiting for the upper floors to be completed, tourists are now accommodated on the first floor, where the family usually live. It is interesting to note how the rooms change function in the summer, with the family sacrificing their comfort and lifestyle to ensure a comfortable stay for tourists. When there are many tourists, Elton and his parents are forced to use only the kitchen, which, with the addition of three sofa beds, is transformed into a bedroom. Quite ironically, this recreates the way in which the family lived in the old stone house in Zhulaj, where the division of the living spaces into only two interior environments forced parents and children to share the same bedroom.

The choice to sacrifice one's living space to rent one's home to tourists is, moreover, well justified by the strong earnings that this guarantees. Tourists during the summer season provide the family the income that allows them to double their budget. Social capital increases as well. Given the small size of the house, when large groups of tourists arrive, Elton distributes the tourists among several houses:

Obviously I'll go in order: first we fill our house, but we cannot accommodate more than three families, or we'll end up sleeping outside! Then I pass to our uncle's house, who can accommodate two other families. Then I pass to family friends' houses where I know that the conditions for tourists are best.

The successful management of the tourist stays translates into prestige for Elton's family, enhancing their relationship and ties with their extended kinship and friendship networks. This leads to advantages which are reciprocated and contribute in turn to their reputation as tourism mediators. The importance of the hospitality offered in one's own home is not limited to this strengthening of one's social networks and solidarity between families, but

expands their intercultural contacts. As Leda's following testimony clearly shows, welcoming international tourists allows Elton's family to 'broaden their horizons', to meet people from other countries, with whom they sometimes stay in contact for a long time through exchanges of phone calls and gifts:

When my husband wanted us to come here to Ksamil I did not agree. I wanted to go to Valona, where there was a part of my family. I didn't know anyone at first and it was very hard. But now, I'm content. When I was little in the village or when I worked in the cooperative, thirty years ago, I never imagined that one day I would host Italians in my house. It seemed impossible! Yet, today our house is open, and we have many friends in Italy. When the tourists return home we continue to talk, we call, we write. A couple from Rome have already come back to us three times and for the holidays they have sent us a beautiful CD with the photos, videos and music of their holidays here in Ksamil . . . when I look at it I am always moved.

Coming to the conclusions of this chapter, and now Part I of the volume, we have seen how the theme of 'roots' can be expressed in different ways. Roots are what second-generation Italian-Albanian young people seek through holidaying in their parents' country of origin, but also where internal migrants to Ksamil decide to build their home, despite the uncertainties and difficulties related to their migration projects. Although this town seems to be made almost exclusively of solid and immovable reinforced concrete, the layers of mobility are as numerous as those that contributed to the uniqueness of the nearby archaeological site of Butrint in centuries gone by. Internal, cross-border, circular and transnational migrations, as well as domestic, regional, international and diaspora tourist flows, have contributed in recent decades to shaping the peculiar ethnoscape of Ksamil. It is a panorama in which the bunkers, which once marked the impassability of the border, are today the backdrop for selfies taken by the tourists who have just disembarked from Corfu. Islands and borders constitute crucial elements of the contemporary Mediterranean landscape and in Part II of the book we will continue our journey, focusing on these hubs of (im)mobility.

Lake Butrint, Ksamil, August 2021

My appointment with Dritan takes place on the shores of Lake Butrint. When we arrive, he is not there yet, but there is another family of tourists waiting, a Japanese-German couple with two teenage boys. After a few moments, Dritan arrives with his friend Koli, who unloads from their car an engine for the small wooden boat that floats in front of us and which will allow us to reach the mussel beds.

It has been more than ten years since I spent months of field research during my PhD here in Ksamil, and this summer, when the Covid-19 restrictions finally ceased, I took the opportunity to return to spend the holidays with my family there. 'Last year we had almost only Albanian tourists,' Dritan tells me. 'No one could go on holidays abroad, so they came here and I can say that they took the place of foreign tourists who could not come . . . it was absurd, because the cruise ships from Corfu passed by here, since some European countries allowed people to travel, but here in Albania no one could disembark! However, this year is different. We again have many people coming from outside, certainly not as many as in 2019, but we are recovering.'

Dritan is a twenty-year-old man full of initiative. A few years ago, he started organizing two kinds of 'experiential tours' for tourists who come to Ksamil, a fact that immediately struck me because during my first period of fieldwork here no one seemed interested in the history and cultural heritage of Ksamil. The first excursion is the 'Oranges Tour', a long walk among the citrus groves of the old cooperative, including a meeting with some inhabitants who worked in the cultivation of lemon and orange trees and where participants can enjoy a taste of their delicious fruits. The second trip is the 'Mussels Tour' which allows the tourist to discover the entire cycle of the production and processing of mussels, concluded with a tasting of *midhie* on the shores of Lake Butrint. 'In Albanian we call mussels *midhie*, today you will hear this word many times, so learn it now!'

We head into the waters which are slightly rippled by the wind. Dritan is a great connoisseur of the lake's natural environment and its unique mussel economy. After all, he grew up here and his whole family works in the industry. 'It is not easy to find an area with the right conditions for the cultivation of mussels and Lake Butrint has proved to be definitely the best place in all of Albania,' he explains. 'It all depends on the salinity of the water, and what we are in is not really a lake, but a lagoon environment that continuously exchanges its waters with the sea through the Vivari canal.' Dritan shows us with his hand the direction in which the canal is located; it extends right to the archaeological park of Butrint.

After about ten minutes we reach the cultivation area. The seventy-two reinforced concrete systems built by the communist government fifty years ago are still there, though battered and eroded by time and salt. Although a part has collapsed and can no longer be used, the still working nets hanging on columns manage to provide enough mussels to meet the demand in Albania and enough too to sell for export. 'The first implants were put in in 1974. My father has rented two for fifteen years and our whole family works for mussels,' continues Dritan. 'Dad grows them, I transport them to Saranda and Tirana, mom and sister clean them. The mussel harvest

begins in April and ends in September and each year you can produce a maximum of five thousand nets of 30 kilograms of mussels each, for a total of 150 tons of mussels. It is a very hard job . . . but today it will be up to you to give us a hand, my dear tourists!' After this announcement, we head for a docking point along the shore of the lake from where large plumes of smoke rise. Here we meet Dritan's mother and sister who, along with other local women, wander among large boilers and mountains of shells. The preparation of the mussels is as tiring as the harvest. First, they must be crushed with heavy boots to be detached from the net, then scraped with a special tool to free them from encrustations, before finally being boiled. 'Here you go,' Dritan says with a smile, handing us a basket of two kilos of mussels. 'Now you will try to clean them and if you do the job well then we will go and cook them and you can eat the fruit of your hard work for lunch!' As we sail back to another part of the lake, we put on our gloves and take part in the cleaning work. My daughters seem enthusiastic about the activity and the prospect of the lunch that awaits us. The trip ends in the best possible way. The mussels are cooked there by another local family, who have set up a tiny restaurant right on the shores of the lake. The only raw ingredients on the menu are the *midhie* of Lake Butrint, but the methods of preparation are endless: *midhie* soup, *midhie* with sauce, *midhie* omelette, spaghetti with *midhie*, battered *midhie*. . . As our mussels are turned into skewers and cooked on the grill, I chat more with Dritan, asking him what he plans for his future. 'I am twenty-four years old and since I was a child I have been working with mussels. Yesterday I drove all night to Tirana to sell 300 kilos to the restaurants of the capital, for in this period there is a great demand. But thanks to the efforts of my family, I am also studying at the university, in Saranda. I chose the industry of tourism and I hope one day to have my own tour operator. Tours like what we did today are samples of what I would like to organize in the future. Bringing tourists here for me is a way to tell the story of my family, to enhance our work because there is so much knowledge that is in danger of being lost. Today nobody wants to do this job anymore. If these tours go well, working with tourists will be my way to continue the family tradition and not to emigrate abroad, as many young people of my generation have done.'

NOTE

This chapter expands on the contents I previously presented in Chapter 4 of the Italian-language book *Hotel Albania* (Vietti 2012a). I discussed the social transformation of Ksamil also in the chapter 'Old and New in Ksamil: Migration and Urban Transformation in a Village in Southern Albania' (Vietti 2012b) included in the edited book *Changing Urban Landscapes: Eastern European Cities since 1989*.