

The Albanian Chams of Greece

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Chameria: a Greek-Albanian Borderland

Chameria is a mountainous region of the southwestern Balkan Peninsula that now straddles the Greek-Albanian border. Most of Chameria is in the Greek Province of Epirus, corresponding largely to the prefectures of Thesprotia and Preveza, but it also includes the southern-most part of Albania, the area around Konispol. It is approximately 10,000 square kilometres in size and has a current, mostly Greek-speaking population of about 150,000.

As an historical region, Chameria, also spelled Chamuria, Chamouria or Tsiamouria, is sometimes confused with Epirus which is in fact a much larger area that includes more inland territory in northwestern Greece, for example, the town of Janina/Ioannina, and also much of southern Albania.

Geographically speaking, Chameria begins to the north at the rivers Pavlle and Shalës in the southern part of Albania. It stretches southwards along the Ionian coastline in Greece down to Preveza and the Gulf of Arta, which in the nineteenth century formed the border between Albania and Greece. It does not include the island of Corfu or the region of Janina to the east.

The core or central region of Chameria, known in Greek as Thesprotia, could be said to be the basins of the Kalamas and Acheron Rivers. It was the Kalamas River, known in ancient times as the Thyamis, that gave Chameria its name.

The Albanian Chams of Greece as a People and an Ethnic Minority

There are now three distinct groups of Albanians in Greece and it is appropriate to understand the distinction between them.

The first group, the Chams, known in Greek as *Tsamides*, were no other than Albanians living in the extreme southern part of Albanian-speaking territory. The Albanian people can be divided linguistically into two main groups: the Ghegs or northern Albanians and the Tosks or southern Albanians. The linguistic division between them is more or less along the Shkumbin River that flows through central Albania, past Elbasan, to the Adriatic Sea. Thus, the Albanians north of this river, including the Kosovo Albanians, speak Gheg dialects, and the Albanians to the south of the river, including the Chams, speak Tosk dialects. The Chams are therefore the southern-most group of Tosk Albanian speakers.

The second group of Albanians in Greece are the descendents of the Albanian tribes that migrated southwards into Greece in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and settled in the central and southern part of the country. They speak a slightly different Tosk dialect known in Greek as *Arvantiká*. This Arvanitic Albanian, if we can call it such, was once widespread in

central and southern Greece: in particular in Attica, Boeotia, large swathes of the Peloponnese, on Euboea, Andros and the islands of the Saronic Gulf. This language is alas dying out rapidly. The traditional Albanian settlements of these regions, over 300 villages, are now very much assimilated, and the vast majority of competent speakers of Arvanitic Albanian are over 80 years old.

The third group of Albanians in Greece, by far the largest community, are the new immigrants who have moved to Greece from Albania in search of work since the collapse of the communist dictatorship in 1990. It is estimated that there are now over half a million Albanian immigrants, legal and illegal, throughout Greece.

The Cham Albanians are thus one very specific group of Albanian speakers in Greece. Among their traditional settlements in the now relatively sparsely inhabited region of Chameria were Gumenica/Igoumenitsa, Filat/Filiates, Paramithia/Paramythia, Parga and Margëlliç/Margariti and, in particular, many smaller villages that were abandoned and are in ruins and presently covered in vegetation. There were Cham settlements sporadically southwards as far as Preveza.

When Greek forces took possession of Chameria and southern Epirus in the Balkan War of 1912, the Chams suddenly found themselves in Greece, cut off from the rest of Albania. In the following decades, in particular the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, the vast majority of the Chams emigrated or were expelled from Chameria and now live for the most part in southern Albania. There are major Cham communities in most central and southern Albanian towns where they still form a distinct though increasingly assimilated community. There are also notable Cham communities in the United States and in Turkey that are active in promoting Cham identity.

Brief History of Chameria and the Chams

The earliest written references to the Albanians in the southwestern Balkans date from the eleventh century. They occur primarily in Byzantine chronicles. We have little information about the ethnic composition of Chameria and Epirus at this time and, indeed, for several centuries to come, but it was no doubt a mix of Albanians, Greeks and Vlachs as it is today, probably with a good portion of Slavs and 'Latins', too. One early Albanian ruler of the region was Peter Losha, known in Albanian as Pjetër Llosha and in Greek as Petros Leôsas, who was the despot of Arta from 1359 until his death in 1374. According to Albanian writer Ekrem bey Vlora (1885-1964), Losha stemmed from a leading Albanian family that led some 10,000 Albanians to the plains to Thessaly between 1220-1235. He fought his Greek and Serbian rivals for many years and established a short-lived realm for himself after the battle of Achelous in 1359 when he assisted Charles Thopia in defeating the despot of Epirus, Nikephoros II Orsini. Peter Losha died of the plague in Arta in 1374 and his realm was then united with the Despotate of Angelokastron and Lepanto. His successor, Gjin Bua Shpata, member of another feudal Albanian family, united the two regions under his rule in the Despotate of Arta, now stretching from the Gulf of Corinth to the Acheron River. He was subsequently in conflict with the despot of neighbouring Epirus, Thomas Comnenus Palaeologus (Thomas II Preljubović), known as the Albanian-slayer (*Albanitóktonos*), whose sister, Helena, Shpata had married. In 1380-1382 Thomas called on the

help of Ottoman forces from Thessaly to fight Shpata. Gjon Bua Shpata was later in conflict with Leonardo I Tocco, until his death in October 1399, when he was succeeded by one Maurice Bua Shpata. Maurice took Janina in 1403 but was unable to hold it. The Venetians seized Lepanto from him, thus breaking his power. He died in Arta and his realms were taken over by the Count of Cephalonia.

By the end of the fourteenth century, Chameria and much of Epirus had been taken over by the Turks, who seized Janina in 1430. In 1443, Scanderbeg (1405-1468) was able to extend his Albanian realm southwards into Epirus, but by 1449, the Ottoman Turks had conquered Arta and, thirty years later, the Venetians lost all of their possessions on the mainland, with the exception of Parga and Butrint. Peace and stability were established under Ottoman rule and the population gradually converted to Islam and adapted a more Oriental lifestyle. It was nonetheless in this period that the seeds of discord were laid between Muslims and Orthodox Christians, in Chameria and throughout the Ottoman Empire, because of the different official status and treatment accorded to the two groups.

In the late eighteenth century, Epirus, and Chameria within it, fell under the sway of the Albanian ruler, Ali Pasha Tepelena (1744-1822), also known as Ali Pasha of Janina. From his position of governor of Janina in 1788, Ali Pasha rose to create a virtually independent state, which he maintained with brutal force until his death in February 1822. He allied himself tactically with the Greek rebel movement to counter Ottoman predominance and maintained close diplomatic relations with England and France. Behind the romantic facade of the serai of Ali Pasha overlooking the beautiful lake of Janina, the "capital of Albania" as it was known, a town that was visited and admired by western authors such as François Pouqueville (1770-1838), William Martin Leake (1777-1860), Samson Cerfbeer de Médelsheim (1777-1826), Thomas Smart Hughes (1786-1847), John Cam Hobhouse (1786-1869), Lord Byron (1788-1824), Sir Henry Holland (1788-1873), Charles Robert Cockerell (1788-1863) and Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), was in reality a terror regime.

Greece achieved independence in 1830 and was, from that time, ever intent on expanding its territory northwards into Albania in order to liberate the Orthodox population. Epirus, as part of the Ottoman Empire, however remained Albanian. The Vilayet of Janina was created in 1864 under an administrative reform and encompassed all of Epirus and much of southern Albania, a total of 17,200 square kilometres. Until the late nineteenth century, political allegiances in the region were determined primarily by religious affiliation. Muslims, be they Albanian or Greek-speaking, were, in general, loyal to the sultan, whereas Orthodox Christians looked towards Christian Greece for salvation. For the Albanians, it was only in the period of the League of Prizren (1878-1880) that ethnicity became more important than religion. Increasingly they viewed themselves as Albanians rather than as Muslims, Orthodox or Catholics. Among the firm supporters of Albanian territorial integrity within the Ottoman Empire was Abedin Dino (1843-1906), as known as Abedin Pasha of Preveza, who played a major role in Albanian politics at the time of the League of Prizren and who was a member of its central committee, representing his native Chameria. It was in good part due to his activities that the Vilayet of Janina did not fall to Greece and remained under Ottoman-Albanian administration until 1912, corrupt and inefficient though this administration may have been.

The year 1912 was to prove dramatic for Chameria and the Cham population. In the autumn of that year, Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece joined forces in the First Balkan War to rob the Ottoman Empire of its European territories and to expel the Turks from the Balkans. Fearful of seeing his country partitioned between the rising Christian powers, Ottoman Albanian political figure Ismail Qemal bey Vlora (1844-1919) swiftly declared Albanian independence at Vlora on 28 November 1912. The declaration was more theoretical than real as the authority of the new Albanian state did not extend far beyond the town, but it proved decisive for the future of Albania. On 18 October 1912, Greek troops had crossed Albania's southern border at Arta and advanced northwards into Epirus. Preveza was taken on 21 October. Six months later, on 6 March 1913, with Crown Prince Constantine (1868-1923) at their head, Greek forces entered Janina triumphantly after a three-day battle near Bizani and took 33,000 Turkish and Albanian soldiers prisoner. Epirus and Chameria had fallen or, alternatively, been liberated. By the time of the conquest of Janina, other Greek troops had advanced as far as Vlora.

The new border between an expanding Greece and a nascent Albania remained unfixed for some time and this resulted in long-term political instability in the region. The latent hostilities which had slumbered between Christians and Muslims, between Greeks and Albanians in the southern Balkans, exploded into an orgy of violence. Chaos reigned throughout southern Albania and Epirus and much blood was spilled. Mid'hat bey Frashëri (1880-1949) denounced the savagery of the Greek attack on southern Albania in his memorandum "The Epirus Question - the Martyrdom of a People", but serious war crimes were certainly committed by all sides. Thousands of Albanian refugees fled to Vlora where they camped out in appalling conditions. Many died of typhus and starvation.

At the Conference of Ambassadors in London in the spring of 1913, the representatives of the six great powers (Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary and Russia) were unable to agree on whether Epirus would be given to Albania or Greece and, if divided, where the border would be drawn. It thus set up an International Boundary Commission in August 1913 that was sent to the region in the autumn of that year to try and divide the undividable. The ethnic identity of the population was to play the determining role in fixing the border, but other factors were weighed as well. The results of the work of this Commission were put to paper in the Protocol of Florence, signed in December 1913, which left Chameria, with its majority Albanian population, on the Greek side of the border, and left a substantial Greek minority on the Albanian side.

The new Albanian government was unable to exert its influence in the south of the country and, despite the Protocol of Corfu of May 1914 that confirmed the *status quo*, Greece retained *de facto* power over much of southern Albania, which it called Northern Epirus.

Chameria on the southern side of the border was directly incorporated into Greece after its conquest in 1913. By the beginning of the First World War, in the summer of 1914, the young Albanian state had virtually ceased to exist so there could be no thought of Chameria returning to Albania. A new Greek administration was set up to the joy and enthusiasm of the Greek Orthodox population, but from the start, its actions and activities alienated the Muslim Albanian inhabitants, perhaps intentionally. It gradually became apparent that Orthodox Albanians were to be assimilated and Muslim Albanians were to be driven out of the country. Over the coming

years, including those of the First World War and immediately thereafter, pressure were exerted in various ways, from subtle to violent, to encourage and indeed force the Muslim Albanians to leave Chameria. Paramilitary bands, such as that of Deli Janakis, attacked Albanian villages, terrorising the population, and hundreds of young men were deported to camps on the islands of the Aegean Sea. Large swathes of land were expropriated under the pretence of an agrarian reform, and little compensation, if any, was paid to the one-time owners, wealthy Muslim Albanian families, who now had little choice but to emigrate.

In January 1917, Italian troops occupied Konitza, Delvinaki and Sajada for a time and replaced the Greek administration with an Albanian one. After years of oppression, the tables turned and the Albanians took their revenge on Greek villages that were plundered and taken to task.

The First World War was followed by the Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922. One result of this equally bloody conflict was a major population exchange. According to the Convention on the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Population, signed in Lausanne on 30 January 1923, Orthodox Christians in Turkey, over a million of them, were to be resettled/expelled to Greece, and Muslims living in Greece were to be resettled/expelled en masse to Turkey. Exceptions were made only for the Greek residents of Constantinople and the Turks living in western Thrace, The Muslim Albanian population of Chameria and Epirus was not mentioned in the Convention at all. Much anxiety arose in Chameria until the Greek Government declared on 19 January 1923 that the Albanian Muslims would be exempt from the proposed exchange. A mixed commission of the League of Nations, with no Albanian representative, was seconded to the region to determine the origin of the Muslim population there. Its task was not as straight-forward as one might have expected because many Chams, in view of the official and unofficial persecution and discrimination they suffered under the Greek authorities, wished to be included in the exchange and to get away. Others, despite Greek government pledges, were simply told to pack up and leave for Turkey, and Greek refugees from Anatolia were settled on their land and in their homes.

The early 1930s saw an improvement in the relationship between the Albanian Chams and the Greek state, in particular in the late years of the administration of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936), but things worsened dramatically from 1936 with the rise of the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas (1871-1941), when policies of open repression were pursued once again. The use of the Albanian language was forbidden in public and in private, and Albanian books and periodicals were no longer tolerated. Albanian-language education had been rigorously banned in Chameria since 1913. Under the pretext of searching for arms, the police regularly broke into Cham homes and beat up the inhabitants, often making arbitrary arrests. Even in periods when the pressure let up, the Albanians of Chameria were always given to understand that they were not welcome in Greece.

In April 1939, Italian forces under Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) invaded Albania and, within five days, they forced King Zog to flee abroad and occupied all of the country. With this sudden invasion, Albania lost its independence and was incorporated as part of Mussolini's new Roman Empire. The Italians next set their sights on Greece. In preparing the campaign for the invasion of Greece, the Italian viceroy of Albania, Francesco Jacomoni di San

Savino (1893-1973), began agitating about the ill-treatment of the Cham minority there and intimating that, under Italian rule, things would be different and Chameria might be reunited with Albania. The discovery of the headless body of Cham rebel leader, Daut Hoxha (1895-1940), decapitated allegedly by Greek agents, served as a turning point. Hoxha's head was circulated in the villages of the region to intimidate the inhabitants and force them to flee. The Italian foreign minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano (1903-1944), made much of the incident in August 1940 to create a major diplomatic row between the two countries and to persuade Mussolini of the necessity of invading Greece.

It is understandable that the Chams, after a quarter of a century of treatment as second-class citizens under Greek rule, were not particularly averse to a change of regime. Many of them were convinced that the Italian invasion of Greece would bring about a substantial improvement in their lot, which it in fact did to some extent. With the Italian occupation of Chameria and Epirus in late October 1940, the tables turned once again, however, for the Orthodox Greeks of the region, who found themselves subjected to Cham authority, control and persecution. By the summer of 1942, a Cham civilian administration with local councils (*këshilla*) had replaced the former Greek structures almost entirely. The Italian authorities in Chameria, and the Germans who succeeded them in September 1943, both accentuated traditional ethnic rivalries between the Albanians, Greeks and Vlachs to maintain their rule. Albanians and Vlachs, formerly subjected, were now consciously promoted, and militia units composed entirely of Chams were created to keep the Greek population under control. A British military mission secretly contacted Cham leaders under the German occupation to try and persuade them to turn against Germany, but the Chams logically refused, not out of love for Nazi Germany, but simply because the only prospect the British could offer them was a return to Greek rule.

With the German withdrawal in the summer and early autumn of 1944, Greece was enmeshed in the initial throes of a bloody civil war. British forces, anxious to secure the Ionian coastline in order to ensure maritime supply routes, encouraged the forces of a local military commander, General Napoleon Zervas (1891-1957), to take over the region. Zervas, the founder and leader of a Greek resistance movement called the National Republican Greek League (*Ethnikós Demokratikós Ellenikós Sýndesmos* – EDES), became known for his brutal ethnic cleansing of the Albanians of Chameria from June 1944 to March 1945. He and many of his men regarded the Chams collectively as collaborators with the Italians and Germans, and sought vengeance. Several thousand men, women and children from Chameria found their deaths during his incursions. On 27 June 1944, his forces entered the town of Paramithia and killed about 600 Muslim Chams - men, women and children - in an orgy of violence. Many of the victims were raped and tortured before being slaughtered. Another EDES battalion advanced into Parga the next day where 52 more Albanians were killed. On 23 September 1944, the village of Spatar near Filat was looted and 157 people were murdered. Numerous young women and girls were raped, and other unspeakable crimes were committed. The Chameria Association in Tirana estimates that a total of 2,771 Albanian civilians were killed during the 1944-1945 attacks on Cham villages. In the immediate aftermath, virtually the entire Cham population, defenceless and petrified, took to the hills and fled for their lives to Albania.

It may be noted in passing that in 1947, after the Second World War, despite his evident war crimes and the fact he was himself suspected of collaboration with the Nazis, Napoleon Zervas was made Greek minister of public order.

The cleansing of the Muslim Chams of Greece at the end of the Second World War marked the end of a one painful chapter of Cham history and the beginning of another. The Albania, to which the exhausted and starving Chams fled, had shortly before their arrival come under the control of Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) and his communist forces. The new Marxist rulers were not entirely disposed to assist their suffering compatriots as they, too, suspected them of having collaborated with the fascists. The Chams were nonetheless given refugee status and allowed to remain in Albania. It was the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), active as a relief agency in Albania from September 1945 to the spring of 1947, that provided emergency assistance to the Chams by distributing tents, food and medicine to their squalid camps in Vlora, Fier, Durrës, Kavaja, Delvina and Tirana. The Cham refugees were initially put under the supervision of the so-called Anti-Fascist Committee of Cham Immigrants which had been created in 1944 as part of the communist-dominated Anti-Fascist National Liberation Front.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, the Anti-Fascist Committee of Cham Immigrants campaigned for the return of the Chams to their homeland. Most of them did not want to stay in Albania anyway, in particular in view of the Stalinist-type purges taking place there. The Committee held two congresses in 1945, one in Konispol and the other in Vlora, and wrote memoranda and sent telegrams in support of its goals. The Cham issue was also brought up by Albania at the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, but all of these activities proved to be in vain. Efforts to internationalize the Cham issue fell, for the most part, on deaf ears. For several years, the Chams continued to hope that when the political situation calmed down, they would be able to return to Greece. However, this did not happen. Even today, in the twenty-first century, elderly Chams wishing to see the land of their birth, even on a short visit, are turned back at the border by Greek customs officials. Their passports are stamped *persona non grata* and on occasion are even torn up before their very eyes.

By the early 1950s, the Cham issue was considered closed. The Albanian authorities gave the Chams compulsory Albanian citizenship, and dissolved the Committee. In 1953 and 1954, the Greek authorities passed laws declaring all Cham property abandoned and thus duly confiscated. There was to be no return.

The Chams in Albania presently form a community of at least 250,000 people. They are represented by the National Political Association Chameria (*Shoqëria Politike Atdhetare Çamëria*), which was created on 10 January 1991 after the fall of the communist dictatorship. This association continues to call for the return of the Chams to their homeland in Greece and has appealed for greater cultural freedom for Orthodox Chams still living there. It organises a march from Konispol to the Greek border every year on 27 June, in commemoration of the expulsion. Also associated with the Cham community in Albania are the political Party for Justice, Integration and Unity (*Parti për Drejtësi, Integrim dhe Unitet*) which currently has two seats in parliament, and the Institute of Cham Studies (*Instituti i Studimeve për Çamërinë*) which seeks to promote academic research on the history and culture of the Chams.

Many decades have passed since the tragic events of the Second World War, yet there is still a lingering sense of injustice and victimization among the Chams. This is the reason, despite the excellent relations between Greece and Albania and the general friendly relations between the Greeks and the Albanians as peoples, why the Cham issue will not go away.

There is no serious talk nowadays of a change of borders or a return of the Chameria region to Albania. After a century in existence, the present border is universally accepted as a reality. What is it then that the Chams want?

At the end of the Second World War, the Chams were collectively deprived of their Greek citizenship and their property, and were driven off their land. What they seek is an acknowledgment of the injustice done to them. They also want a return of their property or compensation for their losses, and many of them seek the right to go back and live in their native Chameria, i.e. a restoration of their Greek citizenship. An essential impediment to the attainment of these modest objectives is the Greek War Law of 1940, that *de jure* is still in force. For decades, the Greek authorities have stuck their heads in the sand and refused to discuss any of these problems. Mantra-like, they have simply denied the existence of a Cham issue or indeed the very existence of an Albanian minority in Greece.

While property issues are certainly delicate and complicated to resolve, it might be noted that Chameria is a sparsely populated region. Were the Chams to be allowed to return to their homes and traditional skills, they would no doubt contribute to a strengthening of the economy of Epirus. The return would also put an end to latent resentments. Use of the Albanian language by this minority would objectively pose no threat to the integrity of the Greek state, just as the Greeks living in southern Albania, who do enjoy full minority status, are no threat to the integrity of the Albanian state.

In the long run, the European dimension must intervene on the Cham issue and help provide a solution. It can only be hoped that one day soon, following the example of western Europe, the border between the Greece and Albania will be stamped into the ground and made invisible, and that the people of the two countries will all be able to come and go as they wish, leaving the sombre past behind them.

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