3. 'Home to go'[1]. Albanian older parents in transnational social fields

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Drawing on ethnographic research in Albania, this chapter engages with notions of ageing and home in the context of transnational migration. It rests on the premise that home can constitute of multiple belongings across space and in time (Massey 1991; Ralph and Staeheli 2011). The spatiality of home as manifested at various scales – as a house/family, as a local community/village or city, as a country/nation – is given meaning by feelings, experiences and memories of individuals who physically and socially construct these homes, and make them part of their life (Blunt and Dowling 2006). This is particularly the case for migrants whose migration often challenges and expands the concept of home in intriguing ways. Interest on this particular area of migration studies has been on the rise with a considerable body of literature engaging with conceptualisations and lived experiences of home amongst migrants (e.g. Ahmed *et al.* 2003; and for a review see Ralph and Staeheli 2011). The literature on transnational migration in particular has made a significant contribution to understanding how migrants connect across borders and continue to maintain relations with their original 'homes' – whether these are their families, origin villages and towns, or homelands (Vertovec 1999). However, the focus is consistently on working-age migrants. More recently attention has shifted in two directions: to the 'left behind'– often children and older people remaining in areas of origin (Toyota *et al.* 2007); and to the ways in which migration specifically affects older people (Baldassar 2007; King *et al.* 2014).At the intersection of these sets of literature and drawing on narratives of older people in rural southeast Albania, this chapter seeks to contribute to understandings of the ways in which migration shapes older people's views, practices and imaginations of home.

The setting of Albania – intensive post-1990 internal and international migration, persistence of patriarchal relations, and strong cultural meanings of 'family' and

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[1] *Home to Go*, 2001, Adrian Paci, where the half-naked artist is carrying, with obvious difficulty, a ceramic tiled roof strapped to his back.

'home', to name but a few characteristics – provides fertile ground for such analysis. The institution of the family is considered as the key pillar of Albanian society, with strong hierarchies of gender and age shaping social roles, everyday practices, identity and belonging (Kaser 1992). This multi-generational family, living under the same roof, is simultaneously also the site of the 'home'. In contrast to men, women's belonging to such a 'home' traditionally shifted upon marriage as she joined her husband's family (Backer 1983). The five decades of communist rule had mixed outcomes. The communist Party's efforts to shift citizens' loyalty from the family's patriarch to the country's 'supreme leader', Enver Hoxha, somewhat backfired. The ban on migration abroad, tightly controlled internal movements, widespread poverty and lack of resources, combined to limit opportunities for geographical mobility. Consequently, building and setting up a new home became for many a long-cherished dream (Misja and Misja 2004).

The collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s found Albania with a dilapidated housing stock under pressure from overcrowding and a suppressed rural population. The pent-up anger and a desire to 'escape' rural areas, and the country/homeland which had come to resemble a 'prison', found their vent in migration. A large scale exodus ensued with the result that by 2011, the country's resident population had shrunk to 2.8 million whilst its emigrant population numbered 1.4 million, living mainly in neighbouring Greece and Italy (INSTAT 2011; World Bank 2011). Consolidation of these migrant populations abroad and continued links with their places of origin in Albania have given rise to 'transnational social fields' (cf. Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004). Older people, the key protagonists in this chapter, are involved in this transnationalism either as migrants themselves, or through the e/affects of the migration of their family members.

The chapter, therefore, seeks to address three key questions: i) how do older parents who live on their own in villages of origin after all their children have emigrated, construct and imagine home? ii) how does transnational migration shape such concepts of home? iii) what can be said about the multi-scalarity of home as the house, the family, the local village and the country/nation? The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. First, I elaborate on the data collection methodology and analysis. Next I discuss how the 'transnational home' is constructed; how its constitutive places of mooring are given meaning through culture, emotions and

memories (see also Hannam *et al.* 2006). In the subsequent 'findings' sections, I continue this engagement with older people's notions of home, by following them on their migratory journey from their Albanian village of origin, as migrants abroad and back to the 'homeland' again. For some this journey is only virtual, but emotional nonetheless. Thus perceptions of home amongst older people are examined and traced as they change over the years and become subject to the various life-course and migratory trajectories of the family.

Data, sites and methods

This chapter draws on data – mainly in-depth interviews and participant observation – collected during 2004-2006 as part of my MSc and DPhil degrees at the University of Sussex. My MSc research was a pilot study in rural southeast Albania that analysed the impact of migration of adult children on their 'left behind' older parents, focusing on issues such as older people's socio-economic situation; their everyday life; experiences of, feelings and concerns about the migration of their children, care practices and future plans and aspirations. My DPhil had a broader scope and examined links between internal and international migration in the context of Albania, following migrants from their villages of origin in the southeast to urban areas of Albania and the Greek city of Thessaloniki. Translocal/national care practices were very much in the focus, alongside other topics, such as intra-family gender and generational relations, local communities, and state policies. Interviews were conducted with migrants, but also with their relatives who remained in the villages of origin. Of a total of 160 interviews in both projects, 38 were with older people living on their own after the emigration of all of their children. However, often more than one person participated in an interview, resulting in a higher number of interviewees. Older people were visited in their family home in the village, with due respect for local customs and professional research ethics. Interviews were recorded where permission was granted, and then transcribed and selectively translated. Following a thematic analysis approach, themes were identified after a detailed process of coding and then related back to the research questions framing the specific study. The analysis was aided by qualitative data analysis software Nud*ist.[2] In

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[2] Key publications from this research on the theme of transnational care, ageing and migration include: King and Vullnetari (2006) and Vullnetari and King (2008) [this footnote was about

addition, the interpretative and analytical framework is informed by informal conversations via Skype carried out in 2014 with a small number of Albanian older parents who live transnationally, as well as observations during repeated visits in Albania since 2006.

Making and unmaking home

Blunt and Dowling (2006: 22) argue that home is 'both a place/physical location and a set of feelings', a weaving of 'the material and imaginative realms and processes'. 'Making home', therefore, entwines these physical and affective dimensions to produce a place of significance through a process of interlacing emotions, memories, materialities and artefacts (Ahmed *at el*. 2003: 9). Similarly, 'unmaking home' is also both physical and affective, yet permeated by insecurity, disruption, loss, violence, destruction, dissolution and uprooting (Brickell and Baxter 2012). This complexity of 'making and unmaking home' was very prominent in my interviewees' narratives. It was these interviewees' conceptual and experiential understandings, combined with my particular reading of Albanian culture that inform the use of this concept in this chapter. I start with the language. Linguistically the physical location or 'house/apartment' and the set of feelings and ideas of 'home' are collapsed into one, expressed by one and the same word in the Albanian language '*shtëpi*' (ACS and ILL 2002). Second, the process of building a house for oneself is linguistically and conceptually framed as 'making' (rather than building) a house/home '*bëj shtëpi*'. Dalakoglou (2010) for example demonstrates how Albanian migrants living and working in Greece, the majority of whom work in construction, 'build' houses for others in Greece, but 'make' houses/homes for themselves in Albania. Indeed, home has been integral to the broader migration project in the Albanian context. Not only was the migration of many Albanians motivated by the need and desire to build a house and make their home, but the ruptures brought about by the sudden post-communist migratory movements deeply challenged the widely held notions and experiences of home.

For many families, the project of migration was envisaged as a journey abroad through which financial capital would be accumulated in order to build a house and make a home internally, in Albania's prosperous urban centres, mainly the capital

highlighting the publications based on the data collected through these projects, rather than key in the entire field worldwide. Sorry for the confusion].

(Vullnetari 2012). For such a project a temporary home would be set-up abroad until such time would come for the return. As migrants regularised their status in host countries, found stable jobs and created families, their temporary home became more permanent, yet it coexisted with the project of return.

Over the following 25 years Albanians would engage in dynamic and intensive transnational practices through sending and receiving remittances (financial, social and in-kind), visits (where documents permitted) and hands-on care and construction work which were integral to the process of homemaking in Albania and abroad (Dalakoglou 2010; Vullnetari and King 2008). Thus, migrants constructed home as a multi-sited and multi-scalar project, spanning borders and locations, coined by Dalipaj (forthcoming) as 'poly-topic dwelling'. Physically, the 'home' is constituted of three key sites for Albanian transnational families. First, there is the place abroad where migrants live on a day-to-day basis – often a rented flat or house, but increasingly for some a mortgaged property. This is envisaged as the home for the younger generations. Second, there is the house/apartment in an urban area of Albania which is along a continuum of existence: a wish/idea in migrants' future plans, under construction, or fully completed but empty most of the year to be lived in only during short spells of holidays. This is envisaged as the place of return upon retirement and simultaneously as an investment towards an old-age care plan, given that these migrants' future pensions are rather insecure and fragmented across the countries they have worked in. Third, there is the ancestral house in the village of origin where older parents continue to live. Yet this house is not always 'available' for everyone who lived there at any one time. As the chapter will demonstrate, it is meant for the youngest son and his family, who in turn has the responsibility for its upkeep and homemaking. Multi-directional flows of goods, money and care from one home to another within such a transnational sphere act as conduits through which *a transnational home* is built, moored in specific locales, imbued with social and cultural meanings and emotions.

As young people emigrated, older parents remained in villages of origin, often on their own (King and Vullnetari 2006; Vullnetari and King 2008). Even when they themselves had not emigrated, however, they were very much involved in transnational practices through intensive and frequent engagements with their migrant children abroad (Vertovec 1999). For these older parents, migration was

regarded simultaneously as a process of making and unmaking home. The construction of the urban home mentioned earlier was very much a family project, whereby the migrant's father especially would be involved through advice, mobilisation of kinship networks, visits to the plot of land, and often overseeing various segments of the construction process.

It is in the family home in the village where these processes intertwine more strongly. This is a site where past memories and feelings blend with new acquired meanings through migration. First, this home is the 'hearth', the ancestral place where the roots of the family can be traced back in history. At the same time, it is also the product of practical material and emotional input of older parents' own labour and sacrifices of harsh living conditions of the past. Home was a site of refuge and resistance for many families persecuted during the communist regime, as the only space not invaded by the watchful eye of the omnipotent state (Lubonja 2001). At the same time, it is also a site of fond childhood and family memories for the nostalgic older parents. In the post-communist years, this home acquired new meaning due to remittances invested by adult migrant sons. Often referred to as 'blood money', this investment represents shedding of migrants' sweat and blood in perilous journeys over mountains to reach Greece and on unsafe dinghies to cross the Adriatic sea, harsh and exploitative working conditions, injuries in the course of low-paid work, family separation and sacrifice (see Papailias 2003). Much like the global care chains, remittances connect cities of rich countries where migrants work, with the periphery – villages of origin and homes in poor countries like Albania. Thus, these rural homes become the local expression of global exploitative capitalism and inequalities reflecting clear power geometries (Datta 2012; Massey 1991). Older parents position themselves as guardians of these homes, perhaps among the very few who truly understand the human cost and the *more-than-material value of remittances*. When asked about intentions to migrate, such care for the 'home' in the village was one of the most important factors mentioned by older people in their decision to stay.

> It seems very hard for us at this elderly age to leave our homeland… We don't want to *unmake/ruin* the house of our son [*s'ja prishim shtëpinë djalit*] … Our son has worked so hard for all of this [*na i ka ngritur djali me krahë*]. (Fatime, F60)

> We [don't want to go to Greece] because of our age but also because we feel sorry to *unmake* the home... because if you go the home will be ruined... All that sweat [i.e. investment and sacrifice] will have been for nothing. (Leta, F58)

Such homes, however, are very much gendered. They are guarded for the sons, given that daughters become part of their husband's family upon marriage according the Albanian virilocal and patrilineal customs (Backer 1983). The next section explores this further.

'Home is where the son is'

Post-communist migration in Albania was a process of sudden rupture as families which had lived closely together for generations were suddenly physically separated across locations, by visible (physical) and invisible (documents) borders. Older people found it hardest to adjust to the new realities, creating everyday strategies of coping with separation, loss, longing and belonging (Vullnetari and King 2008). Whilst the process of homemaking, as discussed earlier, was crucial to this adjustment, so was holding on to notion of the ideal 'home', even if this was often no more than a dream. For many older people I interviewed this sense of 'home' was equated with the family (see Hunter, this volume). Somehow, the home in the village where they continued to live was incomplete in the absence of their children coming and going and their grandchildren running around, as Leta (F58) explains:

> Of course emigration has certainly brought economic benefits, we are now much, much better off than before. But it has also brought this separation, distance, our children are far away, we are stressed... Our eyes are full of tears and our hearts ache every day and night... If your children are not here, there is no point to any of this [the house]. Nothing matters anymore [*asgjë s'të hyn në sy*]. For example, here is my house large and beautiful up there and here [the main house and the split kitchen]. What do I want them for? Look, I live here [in the kitchen]. Who lives there [in the big house refurbished with

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remittances]? As long as the children are not here, nothing matters

really.

Often the older parents lived their daily life and even slept in the small outdoor kitchen/living room, while the larger house remained empty for most of the year. The concern of not 'ruining' their son's things in the main building by using them, was combined with feelings of comfort in a 'homelike' and cosy space of the small kitchen they could make their own. In the absence of the physical presence of their loved ones, older people surrounded themselves with photographs of their children and grandchildren, using these home making practices as a means of getting closer to the ideal 'home'. Like Tolia-Kelly's (2004: 317) British Asian research participants, my interviewees used photographs and other objects to make '"other" lives and lands' part of the present home (see also Walsh, this volume).

The nostalgic view of one day achieving this idealised and complete sense of 'home' has parallels to the well-researched 'myth' of return among migrants (Anwar 1979). Massey's (1991: 25) framework of 'power geometries' is very useful here in unpacking this idea of 'home' in terms of whom it includes or excludes and how it is reconfigured. Massey considers home as a place whereby 'different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways', and differentially experience 'home'. Indeed, in the context of Albanian society, such power geometry is rather sharp, although once again migration has affected it to change. Given the particular role of the youngest son as a form of 'retirement plan' for parents, his importance for older people cannot be over-emphasised. Many older parents I interviewed imagined spending their retirement years – especially the very last years of their life when they expected to be frail and need intensive hands-on care – together with their son and his family. Beyond the practicalities of care, this expectation has deeply ingrained social meaning. Parents who are taken care of by their sons, whether through the sending of remittances or hands-on care, acquire enhanced social prestige in the local community. Silverstein *et al.* (2006) found similar outcomes for older people's care in China where age seniority and associated care practices and norms within the family are socially and culturally embedded. Further prestige and subsequent pride flow from interpretations of such transnational care practices as being the result of successful parenthood, as well as demonstrating success of migrants abroad. Thus,

existing arrangements are regarded as temporary and that one day, when the migration project is complete, the two parts of the transnational family will reunite in one physical place.

The location of that place, is however, ambiguous. Some parents are convinced their children will return to look after them when they are frail, no matter what, as Fatime (F60) explains:

> For the moment since they have their jobs and we are still capable of looking after ourselves, why should we ask them to come here? … But, when we get older, whether there is work here or not, they will return of course, because we will need looking after [i.e. hands on care] […] We only have him [even though they also have a daughter], so he looks after us.

Interviews with migrants did indeed confirm that return stays in Albania for the purpose of providing hands-on care for older people nearing the end of their life were not uncommon. Once again, gendered social norms dictated that daughters-in-law provided such care, staying in Albania to do the washing, feeding, and nursing of the older in-law, until he or she passed away, then returning to join the rest of the family in Greece. Thus, whilst the son is the *symbolic*, the daughter-in-law is the *de facto*, carer.

Other parents, however, were realistic that a return of migrants to the village of origin is often highly unlikely, given that many of the circumstances that affected their decision to emigrate in the first place such as lack of jobs, lack of quality education for the children and healthcare services, have not been improved. Therefore, older parents envisage this life and making home together 'wherever the children [read son] might be', for instance:

> At this age, we don't feel like going anywhere. I don't feel like going to the city for instance, to move from here to go to another town, in Albania. We wouldn't like to do that. We would have to, because we would follow our son [*pas djalit do shkosh*]. (Vera, F55)

> So now we say: we will go wherever our children [youngest son and his
> family] are. Material things don't matter. (Mine, F62)

Yet 'follow-the-son' option is not always conflict-free, or practical, leading to older parents becoming disillusioned and actively seeking alternative 'homes' where they can, as shown in the next section.

'There is no place like home'
Reconstituting the ideal 'home' abroad has not been easy. First, when migrants needed parents the most to join them in order to provide care for the young children, migrants' irregular migration status combined with low earnings and small dwelling space presented insurmountable barriers to such family life together. For their part, parents could not obtain visas from host country governments. Second, even when such visits became possible after migrants' regularisation and improved socio-economic situation, ideas, practices and expectations of living together had changed. Pre-migration family life of at least three generations and at times more than one married son under a roof was organised along gender and generational lines: the oldest man as the household head or Lord of the house while the oldest woman as head of the womenfolk. The youngest daughter-in-law was expected to carry out the heaviest tasks and work the longest hours, often under the tutelage of her mother-in-law. At the same time she had the least space to speak and be heard. As such, while pre-migration 'family-homes' are idealised by older people, they were often sites of oppression and, at times, abuse, especially for young women (Murzaku and Dervishi 2003; Nixon 2009). Such power relations are undermined and a certain level of empowerment is achieved by younger women, through migration, precisely by physically leaving the 'village/local community/house-home'. Consider the contrasting views about homemaking and intra-gender power relations in the following two interview excerpts, the first from the mother of a migrant son living in the village in Albania and the second from a young Albanian migrant living in Thessaloniki:

> He [her son] is thinking of returning [...] but my daughter-in-law
> doesn't like it here [in the village]. She says 'I will not go to the village, I

will stay in Korçë [local city], even if we have to rent a place'. And I think to myself 'wait until you come here and I'll show you rented place, we'll see if you'll go and live in a rented place'. They are paying a lot of money there [in Thessaloniki] for rent, for electricity, heating. They live in a good apartment, not just anything. But it costs a lot and my son is paying for it by working around the clock. (Dashamire 75)

In Albania the mother-in-law will be the boss around the house. Whereas here, in *my* house, she can't be, because everything in this house has been bought by me and my husband, and she has nothing to say about it, if she came here. (Alketa F35)

For their part, while enjoying the mutual care provided and received, older people who join their son's families abroad often experience a dual sense of isolation and dependency. Their inability to communicate in the host language isolates them from the wider society. Meanwhile, their low income and limited access to everyday mobility such as a car or frequent public transport create a sense of dependency on, and burden for, their migrant children (King *et al.* 2014).

My two sons, daughters-in-law, two daughters, sons-in-law, children all are in Italy. I live there, but I am unhappy there, I can't wait to come back here [in the village]. There are no Albanians around, they [migrant relatives] all go to work, children to school. Until they come back I go insane with nothing to do. I watch TV but I don't understand a thing because I don't know the language. (Florie, F68)

Feeling out of place abroad makes them yearn for a return 'home', where 'I can stretch my legs whichever way I want, lay down to rest [*dergjem*] any time I want' as Selim (M, 72) puts it. A return also brings one to the 'homeland', where they missed even the 'stones and the trees'. Older people thereby construct Albania as place of comfort and thus 'home', in contrast to the younger migrant generation who had initially experienced it as oppressive, likening it to a prison, and escaping it through

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migration. Behar (M72) from another village is convinced that 'no matter how good it is to be in migration, there is no place like home'.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to expand our understanding of older people's lives, by exploring linkages between transnational migration and home in the context of Albania. Intensive emigration from Albania in the last 25 years has impacted the lives of older people in many ways, most importantly through the physical separation of the family, traditionally the key pillar of Albanian society. Older people have been key protagonists in these migration trajectories, and subsequently in the process of making and unmaking home that their families have been through. Ralph and Staeheli (2011: 525) liken home in migrants' perceptions to an 'accordion' that stretches and expands outwards encompassing 'distant and remote places, while also squeezing to embed people in their proximate and immediate locales and social relations'. The perception of home for my older-age research participants was likewise structured around a transnational social field anchored in two or three sites, at the centre of which was what Hunter (this volume) labels as the 'emotional home'. This 'ideal' home where the family lives together in harmony, is, however, a gendered one, with the son (and his wife and children) at the heart of it. As Blunt and Dowling (2006: 15) argue, gender is thus critical to understanding home.

The transnational social field is important as besides nesting the multi-sitedness of the home, it also helps situate its multi-scalarity through the connections it allows from the scale of the country/homeland to that of the local village and the house. Materialities such as remittances invested in, and connecting these various sites and scales are important building blocks. But more than that, it is the set of meanings given to them that build the 'home' in older people's views and lived experiences. Thus, homes once sites of individual, intra-family and local power expression become the locales where global capitalism asserts its virtues and vices. The houses that make the homes are simultaneously full – of material goods thanks to remittances – and empty, as family members live away. It is here that the tensions between the imagined and the day-to-day experiences are felt strongest. Some younger people left the original homes and homelands because they were oppressive, a prison for their youthful desires and ambitions. In contrast, most older people stay put or return to

these places, to find comfort and rest. Older people find themselves constantly renegotiating their new realities, not least by filling the empty homes in the village with past memories and future dreams. They are home to stay.

Acknowledgment

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