

Zrnosko. Cultural Landscapes and Social Economy of a Village in Mala Prespa

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Abstract

This article shows results of a pilot ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Zrnosko, a Macedonian-speaking village sited on the Albanian side of the trilateral border region of Prespa lakes. It offers insight into the history of the village, connecting histories of life to the social economic configuration of the local environment. These show the *longue durée* role of the forest and the lake, the legacy of the collectivistic organization under the Hoxha regime, and the contemporary marginalization of the village, signaled by widespread narratives about abandonment and lack of job. A participatory mapping activity, carried out in dialogue with locals, tracked the role of toponyms in the villagers' spatial practices, and in the formation of ethnic and linguistic boundaries. The local toponymy offers a further understanding of the village as a cultural landscape, reflecting its historical transformations and the interaction between place and productive activities. Finally, a synchronic-diachronic approach to Zrnosko's social economy suggests a problematic and ongoing process of transition to a new productive model, which alternates subsistence economy with peripheral market-oriented efforts. These elements converge in the exploration of the two-way relation between local productive activities and the spatial organization of the village. Jointly shaped and reproduced, they reveal cultural forms of socialization of the land, as well as the current perception of its increasing desertion.

Key-words: Mala Prespa, Post-Socialist rural economy, Toponymy in borderlands, Participatory mapping, Cultural landscape, Environment and socio-spatial practices.

In summer afternoons, while the sun slowly dips behind the peaks of Suva Gora, the tea gardens on the southwestern shore of Mala Prespa become an unusually pale green. When we were beginning our first walk in Zrnosko, cows were on the main road intersecting the village, on their way back from the pastureland near the forest. The herd is managed cooperatively by the villagers, and a woman in her thirties was observing them drawing nearby, speaking with us in Macedonian while waiting for her cow to come back. Valentina was with two little girls, her daughter and niece: two of the few kids living in the village for most of the year.² As the cows arrived, one of them stuck a huge pile of oak hay in its horns. The girls, who probably did not spend much time around the cattle, seemed noticeably scared.

Zrnosko, the main village where we conducted our fieldwork, is located on the part of the Prespa lake region which has belonged to Albania since 1924. The village is surrounded by a mountainous relief, lying on the short fertile valley which faces the water. It is quite geographically isolated from Korce and the other main settlements of the municipality, while sharing the lake with eight other Albanian villages³ and those beyond the Greek and North Macedonian borders.

Local dwellers argue that they live in an abandoned land, ‘populated more by donkeys than by people’. According to the interviewees, Zrnosko has a stable population of around 120 inhabitants. The majority is over fifty years of age, and ten are in their eighties or nineties. A sudden change of perspective on this village surprised us after visiting Cerje, a mountain village nearby. Sited one kilometer from the border with Greece, Cerje is currently inhabited by less than 40 people, mostly elders, living among house gardens gone wild, streets and houses in a very run-down condition, without running water, public electric or gas systems. Almost abandoned to their own fate, *Cerjani* wait for the weekly truck that sells products for basic necessities, when the road is accessible. Also, they wait for a German NGO activist that two years ago promised to come back with some turbines to restore the public water circuit. According to the elders we met, Cerje ‘comes back to life’ only once a year, in August, for the feast day. This traditional event is celebrated around the village Orthodox church, the only public building recently restored.

Compared to Cerje, Zrnosko does not appear as ‘dying’ or desolated as Valentina, and many others, describe it. As we came back from the mountains, a procession of cars was crossing the road which connects Zrnosko to Pustec. The parade, accompanied by drum strokes, was picking up a future bride. Fields are carefully tended and, along with many abandoned houses, bigger ones are under construction. Modern two and three-floor buildings are increasingly replacing the old constructions, made of stone and wood from the mountains and of mud and reeds from the lake. Most of them are uninhabited, and others are occupied only in a small part. Some long-standing scaffoldings show the ones who remained the economic success and the projects of those who migrated to Albanian and Macedonian bigger cities, or further away. In the space of around 80 houses, there are a small shop, two restaurant-hotels and one pub. We also met about ten cars, and five freshly painted *chunkia* near the lake.⁴

The villagers we encountered required us to face hermeneutical ambiguities. While being occupied with their cattle and crops, or working around the forest or the lake, people in Zrnosko often told us that ‘there are no jobs here’ (*nema rabota*). They also think they live in a village that is increasingly emptying, at the same time taking care of the place and waiting for their relatives to come back. In order to analyze these widespread statements and, more

generally, Zrnosko's historical transformations and current socio-economic conditions, we discussed with locals on their life-story and the village's history, navigating through how the former socialist regime and the contemporary transition shaped both. Along with semi-structured interviews, we also used visual ethnography and methods of participatory mapping as ethnographic tools, processing through the dialogue with local informants a detailed map of Zrnosko and its neighborhoods. We explored the villagers' perception of the local geography, their usage of toponyms, and the history of places and their function, which together yielded some insight into the transformation of the productive activities, the social geography, and the political organization of the village.

Participant observation was conducted with particular attention toward the socio-spatial dimension of the local economy, its relationship with the landscape and the social life of the district. It focused on the intense relationality of this local community with the surroundings, which was emerging in symbolic coordinates and spatial practices, shaping the village as a complex social formation interplaying with the environment. While focusing on auto-reflexivity and intensive team briefing, we also monitored the changes in our own perception of the landscape and the village life. Within the research activity itself, we embraced a method of understanding the landscape as an ongoing cultural process (Hirsch 1995). The local forms of interaction with the landscape are thus discovered, together with our research 'field', and not ontologically given. Both are socially practiced, constructed, and represented, throughout and within the relationship with the space, and hence performed in its physical and symbolic dimensions.

Through this article, three main research-paths are explored: How are productive activities in Zrnosko connected to social relations and the organization of space? How are local borders and toponymy related to the legacy of the relation among these three dimensions? How do these interconnected dimensions impact the local definition of job and work, within the proliferation of local discourses about economic marginality, growing emptiness, and the village's future fading?

History of productive activities in Zrnosko, stories of life.

Ethnographic research in Mala Prespa offers the opportunity to confirm how landscape should not be seen as an accidental assemblage of natural elements tackled by the local people. On the contrary, this environment emerges from the evidence as the result of a framework of lived relations, shaped by history, technologies, customs, values, cultural attempts to make a living. From an anthropological perspective, Zrnosko's environment stands as a *task-scape* (Ingold 2000), formed by the social appropriation of the land through its productive use, the knowledge of space, the transformations of labor and technology. Nonetheless, landscapes are built and lived as symbolically constructed spaces, and talking with dwellers about their past and contemporary life opens the path into a deeper understanding of the long relationship between the local social groups and the environment. We have therefore developed our analysis of Zrnosko as a "cultural landscape" (Rapoport 1992; Fischer 2012), where local environments and socio-spatial practices are historically shaped. Nevertheless, it offers a key to interpreting the nature-culture relationship – a central topic since the dawn of anthropological

theory – following the imperative to move beyond both cultural and environmental determinisms (Descola 2005).

As already shown in ethnographic research on some rural areas in the Republic of North Macedonia (Risteski 2011), as well as on the other side of the Greek-Albanian border (Nitsiakos 2016), this regional context offers much evidence of how the local social life is built within a consistent relation with the environment. The villages seem to be as designed by daily and seasonal productive activities as they are by the making of a sacred topography, along with new formal and informal political demarcations. As such, the region of Mala Prespa represents a place of interest for scientists in a variety of research fields, including social and environmental sciences, history, and historical linguistics (Daoutopoulos and Pyrovetsi 1990; Mangalakova 2004; Jovanovski 2005; Duma 2007; Bielenin-Lenczowska 2008; Bogevska-Capitano 2013; Makartsev et al. 2016). Within the frame of a broader political-economic scenario, Zrnosko offers some fascinating examples of how the landscape becomes part of the modes of production and of the forms of social reproduction. Among others, these relations include the selection and propagation of seasonal cultivars and cattle; the community management of clay, straw and hazel bush, still used for barns and more recently for fences; the sacralized connection with the old settlement from where villagers migrated; the impact of the Hoxha regime and of the current depopulation on the appearance of the village.

In search of the history of local productive activities, we visited one of the oldest women in Zrnosko many times. Nuna is the mother of Valentina's father-in-law; she knows she is in her nineties, but does not remember her birthday or that of her sisters.⁵ She was born in a Greek village close to the border, but her family moved to the nearby village of Cerje when she was one year old (around 1925). Then she married in Zrnosko, in the Trpo family. The houses of Nuna and her sons are built one next to the other along one of the central roads of the village, which leads to one of the shops and to the local bar. She lives alone in a small low-rise house, sharing the yard with the house of her youngest son, who moved to England with his family. The son of her eldest sister, Alexo (born in 1945), usually visits her from Pustec. Alexo's sons moved to England and Germany, and they visit Zrnosko only during the summer holidays. The massive migration movements of the last decades partly changed the features of the local long-standing story of cross-border mobility. For example, one of our informants, who returned to the village and built here the local pub, confirmed that in the last years North Macedonia and Greece stopped being the top destinations for labor migration. This happens even though the majority of this border population is already bilingual or trilingual.⁶

Nuna came from Cerje to Zrnosko on horseback as a bride, carrying her clothes and her dowry (*prikya*), without any money or land. Even though she argues that 'there wasn't money back then, there was nothing', she says that her family was wealthy before Enver Hoxha's socialist regime, which she refers to as *pred Envera*: 'before Enver'. She underlines they had a lot of meat, fruits and vegetables, but they were 'not rich, as we are not now either'. Like her nephew and the majority of our informants, Nuna defines wealth in terms of money-holding. 'Before Enver', households were almost self-sufficient, and the circulation of money was mostly limited to market activities in Korce: buying sugar, salt, rice and similar products that could not be found in the countryside. People got their money mostly from selling animals, meat and cheese, or, as Nuna told us, selling some olden gold coins they inherited.

In the last several years before the regime of Hoxha was established, the village consisted of a bit more than 30 households, each with a field of 0.5 to 0.75 acres dedicated to small-scale differentiated agriculture, with ox carts and horses. They grew beans, corn, potatoes, pears, apples and cherries, more rarely peaches, grapes, peppers and tomatoes – usually bought from the market of Korce. In the mountainous forests of the area, they hunted rabbits, gathered mushrooms, dogwoods, herbs like the ‘mountain tea’ (see *Sideritis scardica*). They were drinking it during winter for *popara* (meal), along with cornbread and dried fruits (*oshav*). Honey production, as well as herbs collection, was limited to household consumption, as ‘no one was interested in buying these’. *Rakia* was expensive and challenging to find, like coffee, and according to Nuna, this was the reason why all the villagers usually got drunk during weddings. Along with the transhumant shepherds of the area, sheep, goats and two cows were raised together in the mountains, usually grazing on adjacent pasturelands or in the forest, in order to prevent overgrazing. Livestock was also used strategically for fertilization and forest borders management, while during the winter ‘we were taking oak leaves from the forest, making piles’ (*klavame lisnitsi*). The forest was not privatized, so the oaks (which did not grow in the valley) were managed according to the customs and needs of the whole village. Usually, dwellers were gathering wood and leaves closer to Cerje, crossing the Greek border unbothered. Fishing was also permitted, but few locals worked as fishermen: ‘One could catch carps from the reed as well, and we had a lot of meat back then’, Nuna sums up and repeats: ‘we didn't have money, big houses either, but with regard to food: we ate’.

After the Second World War ended and the Hoxha regime was established, Zrnosko villagers were pushed to convert the economy into a cooperative (*zadruga*) system. The fields and the cattle of all the villages in Mala Prespa were collectivized in 1947. Nuna explains: ‘You work together and you get things. You get bread for everyone in your household. Enver took the wheat we grew and gave us bread. (...) He gave us cows, goats, sheep, space to plant wheat. The land opened up (*se otvori zemja*), tractors came.’ Part of the forest was logged and village workers expanded the fields, digging the stony hills nearby in collaboration with Pustec villagers. Pustec shared with Zrnosko the collective management of the new large-scale regime of productivity, as well as many infrastructures: the club, the administration services, and many of the welfare, education – in Albanian – included. Women and men usually had differentiated roles, working in groups of 10 to 15, every group being responsible for certain activities and areas.⁷ The use of forest was more regulated and the border with Greece became highly militarized.

After the socialist regime ended, the system of collective production and redistribution, which had been in place for about 40 years, disintegrated. As in the case of most of the Southern Albania villages (Bardhoshi 2016), the land of cooperatives was privatized according to the State law n.7501, which allotted the land to local dwellers according to the number of people in each household. ‘The commission didn't return the same land that belonged to the same people before Enver. For us [our family], it was by luck’ – Nuna smiles bitterly, and Alexo adds that most of those who remain in the village nowadays have expanded into abandoned plots through informal agreements and family networks. According to him, there are still many problems with claiming formal ownerships and legal documents, which makes it difficult to apply for funding and investments.

Nuna concludes her memories with ‘I didn't like Enver’ (*Ne go sakav Enverot*). She does not keep her opinion to herself when Alexo tries to persuade her of ‘how good life was back then’, reminding her of all the villagers who abandoned the region in search of fortune. At the end, they both shared the same position: *Za nas e se tejko* (‘For us it has always been hard’).

Defining places, shaping communities: toponymy in Zrnosko.

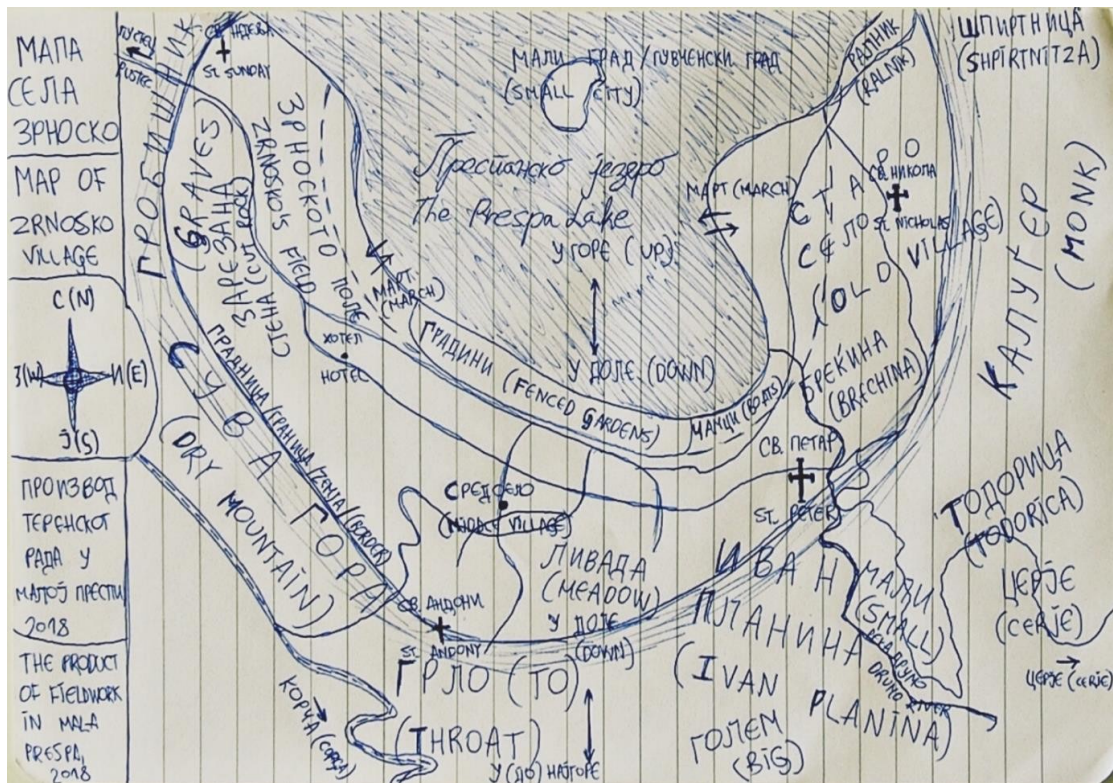
The toponym Zrnosko was officially re-established in 2013, after being substituted by *Zaroshkë* (in Albanian) during the 1970s (Shqiptarja 2013). During the same years, intensive research was conducted about the toponymy of the Ohrid-Prespa basin, on both the North Macedonian and Albanian sides (Włodzimierz 1970).

The name of the village comes from *zrno*, seed, and it reveals the importance of agriculture in the local socio-economic milieu. It suggests how productive activities and local geography seem mutually involved in (re)producing and shaping the cultural landscape. In this small village, the official plates were recently renovated. Soon they emerged as being more than a particularly relevant instrument of emic orientation, hinting that they were actually a reference to a narrative about broader belonging. The plates are bilingual, exemplifying how Zrnosko – not a solitary case in the contemporary Balkans – is positioned in between different national and ethnic discourses, and clashing definitions of homeland.

The fieldwork confirmed that today the local population of the region mostly tend to define themselves as ethnically and linguistically Macedonians. In this sense, street names such as Dame Gruev or Jane Sandanski appear as symbolic boundaries with the rest of the Albanian country. Keeping in mind how every identity-building process is multi-faceted and choice-oriented, we should mention however how the ethnic origins of the population of Mala Prespa are debated even in the recent literature. Some scholars stated that the Slavic population in this region mostly consists of Bulgarian people beyond today's national borders (Mangalakova 2004), while on the other side, these inhabitants are treated as a part of the Macedonian ethnic community (Duma 2007).

Despite this written toponymy, a big part of the local social geography remains unwritten, and shared only by those who live it. Some of these names are clearly part of local orientation, at the same time marking both the local borders and cultural boundaries. This is for example the case of the hills – *Špirtnica* (from the word *špirt*, fire), *Kaluđer* (monk), *Todorica* (named after St. Theodor), the *Grobišnik* (from *grob*, grave) cliff – and of the mountains – *Ivan-planina* (Ivan Mountain) in the south, *Suva gora* (Dry Mountain) in the west – surrounding the village.

The street which goes to Pustec, passing by a socialist monument, crosses the village longitudinally, while two further elements frame the village's latitude: the mountains pass *Grlo* (the 'throat', which goes to Korce), and the Prespa lake. The lake hosts two islands, *Mali grad* (Small city) on the Albanian side, and *Golem grad* (Big city) on the North Macedonian one. Despite the slight slope which leads to the lake, the direction towards the lake is called *ugore/gore* (up), while approaching the center of the village (*sredselo*) is usually indicated with *udole/dole* (down).



Picture No. 1 – Map of Zrnosko village, drawn through participatory mapping.

The fieldwork suggested how interconnected the organization of space, the place-naming process, and the attribution-recognition of the importance of places for the community are. The complex socio-historical formation of local knowledge expressed in toponyms appears strictly connected with the orientation in the social-environmental context. It expresses context-specific temporal and spatial interconnections, which modulate the dialogue between the group and the landscape. The participatory mapping evidenced how the sharing of time and space coordinates partakes in the making of meanings, i.e. in the creative process of symbolic and cultural appropriation of the environment. In other words, adopting Bakhtin’s vocabulary and reflection, the map shows some sensory and operational elements of the shared “chronotope”, it collects some “concrete utterances” of a common language, which is constantly expressed and reshaped as an immediate form of reality (Bakhtin 1975).

We propose here to group Zrnosko toponyms into three main groups, clustering them into physical, historical and religious names. The first group reveals physical features of the places, or the impact of these features on productive activities and their social organization. These references to the environment in toponyms can be observed as communal stored experience that has arisen within the local people’s dialogue with the territory. Among them, *Izrezana stena* (rugged cliff), and *Suva gora*, where sunlight is present all day and people usually collect oak and hazelnut leaves. By *Drumo*, villagers refer to a stream with dried banks. Some old and new elements of the productive activities can be traced through the names of the countryside, which was differentiated by its agricultural destination especially during the Hoxha regime. The bigger field area is *Zrnoskoto pole* (Zrnosko’s field), closer to Pustec. Besides that, there are also *Gradini* (‘fenced gardens’, well irrigated by lake flooding), *Livada* (meadow), *Brečina*

(from the word *breg*, coast) and *Ralnik*, which refers to plough.⁸ It should be noted that the toponym *Livada* is widespread in this part of the Balkans, familiar with many places that share a similar system of traditional management-protection of the land (Nitsiakos 2016, 36-37). During summers, shepherds had their small temporary cottages (*katuni*) in *Katunište*, while carrying sheep grazing in the near zone called *Starčulik* (Old man).

Regarding historical toponyms, our interviewees frequently mentioned *Ivan-planina*, a region consisting of two mountains: *Mali Ivan* and *Golem Ivan*. According to written sources (Duma 2007), the name probably refers to the local duke from the period of Tsar Samuel's (*Samuil*) empire. Villagers, however, never mentioned this figure; they would rather refer to this place as the best one for picking the *Ivansko cvetje*: the 'flower of Ivan', a local name for the mountain tea. *Grobišnik* took the name from the graves in the forest where the bodies of people killed by Germans in the Second World War were buried. The *Izrezana stena* (rugged cliff), which corresponds to the slope of this hill, is also called *Zarezana žena* (beheaded woman), because 'a girl was beheaded there when Turks [Ottomans] were here'. The region called *Staro selo* (Old village) keeps the memory of the original position of the settlement. It is near the small monastery on the Kaludjer (*Kaluđer*) hill, now replaced by the chapel of St. Nicholas, the 'saint who rules the water'. Two interviewees mentioned that the new position of the village is more exposed to sunlight and less affected by the increasing levels of spring flooding.

During the interviews, religious toponyms were specially mentioned while marking the borders of the village. This is where the part of the landscape which is socially organized by the group, and protected by the chapels, gives way to the lake, the forest and the mountains. Four hill regions at the borders of the village are named after the corresponding saints to whom the chapels are dedicated: St. Nicholas, St. Peter, St. Anthony and St. Kyriaki (*Sveta Nedelja*). A sacred oak tree, whose cutting is not permitted, grows in the yard of St. Peter's church, the patron of the new (contemporary) village. Even in this peripheral countryside, the forms of religious belonging have been affected by the strong limitations of religion in the public sphere during the Enver regime's state atheism. Despite this, the Orthodox monks who lived many decades ago in *Kaluđer* are still traditionally remembered as heroic protectors of the village's wealth and prosperity. While articulating the existence of shared moral coordinates, these figures safeguarded the productive needs of the community. They sacralize the village life through their earthly influence, well beyond any more ascetical and theological outlook.

Villagers rarely attend Sunday liturgies, while at the same time the feasts dedicated to saint protectors are widely frequented social events (in particular St. Peter's Day, *Petrovden*, on July 12th). They usually involve villagers of all ages from the entire Mala Prespa region. With some local informants, we reached by *chunkia* the feast of *Sveta Marena* (St. Marina). St. Marina is an isolated monastery that faces the coast zone near Tuminec, and it is currently in course of electrification by solar panels. The celebration soon became the ritual device of an effervescent collective moment, as well as an occasion for debating the issue of identity borders. Traditional dances were mixed with Macedonian national songs and flags. The flags were put aside and the hymns to Macedonianness faded when a boat arrived, carrying the Albanian president Ilir Meta on an official visit.

On many occasions, our interviews with the local population in Mala Prespa region showed the importance of linguistic and national issues as cultural demarcations. The reference to these borders is nowadays as relevant as the local ones. State borders are usually called *sinora* (derived

from the Greek *σύννομα*), or more generally *zemja* (land), but it is not uncommon for the inhabitants of Mala Prespa to adopt the local word *gradnica*. Especially if compared to the standard Slavic *granica*, its etymology reveals the perception of boundaries as something built. As underlined by Makartsev et al. (2016), *gradnica* has stronger affinity with the verb *graditi*, ‘to build’, than with the classic etymological derivation from the word *gran*, edge. On the one hand, boundaries are confirmed as marks of the identity of the group, securitizing a common sense of belonging and orientating its members (Donnan and Wilson 1999). On the other hand, a view from below uncovered how borders are observed, negotiated and constructed in the members’ everyday life (Manos 2016). Since every system is made up of interactions, local communities living along borders seem to live in a “liminal compressed space” (Makartsev et al. 2016), which reveals through villagers’ practices and narratives the dialogical and dialectical inner processuality of any spatial, cultural, political or economic demarcation.

Donkeys and *chai*: some conclusions on the local socialization of the landscape.

Naming represents a key element within the process of domestication of space, revealing, reproducing, and influencing the organization of society. Investigating toponyms and their relationships with the environment is therefore a major area of interest for those who aim to observe how space and time are socially constructed, practiced by bodies, and mapped by discourses. On the one hand, this study in Mala Prespa analytically approached this interconnection as a chronotope, dynamically expressed in social routines and shared coordinates. The process of giving a name to lived spaces, as well as that of sacralizing their boundaries, appears through this lens as an important step in appropriating the environment and structuring patterns of relation. On the other hand, the ethnography showed how the social dimension of the landscape appears mainly through embodied practices of the place. The place-naming became thus comprehensible as a particular form of place-making, as a “spatial practice” (De Certeau 1980), with people interacting with the environment through their activities and movements.

While orienting everyday life in Zrnosko, the written and unwritten toponymy also partakes of multi-level identity-building processes. Unwritten space-orienting elements mainly tell of intragroup collaborations and tensions, of new entrepreneurial maneuvers and a century-long relation with the lake and the forest. At the same time, the names on the freshly painted plates – of little use for locals – witness the importance of transborder ethno-religious identifications, and the stiffening of national narratives which characterize the recent history of the region.

Participatory mapping in Zrnosko has shown, above all, toponymy as a valuable tool to trace cultural representations of the landscape, taking up a role in understanding the village's social economy, its historical transformation and current condition. It found that local toponymy has strong assonances with how human praxis molds the landscape, resonating with the configuration of productive activities. Despite this connection, it is interesting to note that contemporary space-orienting elements do not make consistent reference to the *zadruga* system. Interviews failed to solve this discrepancy, confirming the ‘time of Enver’ as a key factor

in understanding the former daily life of villagers, as well as in narrating the contemporary one. Since the Hoxha regime deeply integrated Zrnorsko's productive activities into the socialist republic of Albania, national and productive borders started corresponding. This larger-scale modernization project radically transformed the attitudes of dwellers and the local ecology, at the same time permeating this predominantly Orthodox and Macedonian-speaking minority with new identity-building processes.

The end of cooperatives inaugurated for the villagers a new era. They describe the new Mala Prespa as a place where 'everyone grows their own field', indicating the increasing dissolution of the village as a productive body, both in the previous almost-autonomous model and in the statalized one. The fading of community collaboration also shed some light on the disconnection between 'job' and 'work' that we drew as ethnographic evidence at the beginning of the article. Not coincidentally, many interviewees mentioned the contemporary absence of jobs as a counterpart in narratives about Mala Prespa during the socialist regime, usually described as a coherent productive and social body.

Villagers' narratives of their place also share a sense of it having 'gone wild'. On the one hand, this appears contradicted by the constructions of new walls, fences and buildings, which seem to fix the perimeters and the usability of spaces with material clarity. The privatization of agricultural plots pursued the effort to redirect the management of the land towards small-scale business, in a context where a large part of today's work activities does not result in monetary gains as an outcome. In this sense, *nema rabota* became synonymous with *nema pari* (no money), accounting for the widespread perception that these contemporary profit-oriented projects are fragile, and affected by the remoteness of this border region. On the other hand, these demarcations co-habit with the remains of an ailing infrastructural regime. Villagers complain that Zrnorsko does not offer economic opportunities and that the current Korce markets – the only commercial outlet for most of the village products – does not offer great payoff. This situation also pushes the people who remained in the village to develop a predominantly food self-sufficient productive model, which limited, for example, the local development of fishing and milk production. Most of the money circulation is deterritorialized, since it is largely the result of migratory movements, which are, less and less often, short-range transborder ones (Stojanova 2015).

The current condition seems to mobilize traditional patterns of social organization and management of environmental resources. In the same breath, the attempts to monetize their efforts put villagers who remained in search of new and more effective business strategies. In some cases, the possibilities given by the commercialization of the landscape drive the development of service-oriented projects, mostly devoted to touristic promotion: hotels and restaurants. The crisis of the local social economy, and the emerging of a new one, brings to the surface new intragroup divisions, and potential boundaries among villagers. Those seem mainly readable according to two idioms: age and kinship. For example, the process of land distribution has growingly reorganized the land parcels, largely following over the years the lines of family ties. The recent, still ongoing, emergence of fence structures tends to trace these patterns. At the same time, agricultural activities failed to become attractive work to the small group of young people remaining in the area, who often reject them as 'things for grandpas'. Following the lines of family ties within the local micro geo-practices, we could also approach the case of the four commercial spaces in Zrnorsko, which all happen to be family enterprises.

Compared to agricultural activities, they involve the young population more actively, reducing the divide between generations; furthermore, while the divide within kinship groups is here confirmed, their organization seems to be more permeable.

The isolation and growing depopulation give the locals the impression of being in a dying village, at the same time reinforcing ethnic and linguistic claims versus the rest of Albania. Claims and practices of proximity involve the villagers living around the Mala Prespa lake, within and beyond the frontier. Especially on the Albanian side, this goes together with the acquisition of a minority status. While increasingly claimed especially within the state frame, it assumes its relevance more on a post-national perspective, also connected to the weakness of state apparatuses. In a way, as it has been widely studied (Ragaru 2007; Belloni and Ramović 2020), the lines of political and ethnic demarcation, as they become explicitly institutionalized, are legitimized and transformed into ways for political mobilization. This happens on several levels, from the micro-level to the policy programs and social engineering of international entities, both often contributing to disaggregating the state frame as a unified political space. Nonetheless, these identity boundaries are only partially interpretable in terms of political authority, whose framework seems to have a minor role in the daily life of the village. The claim of a minority status then must be contextualized in a fringe society, almost unkempt by governmental authorities and marginally integrated in contemporary value-accumulation circuits.

Recent political theory has been engaged widely in demonstrating how important border-zones are to the understanding of contemporary global politics, as key sites of the articulation and re-articulation of labor. Studies such as the one by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) indicate that borders need to be examined not as marginal social spaces, but as saturated ones – as they are saturated by competing norms and strategies, territorial policies, overlapping bureaucracies and power technologies, heterogeneous regimes of labor and accumulation, multiple patterns of sovereignty and citizenship.⁹ While it confirms some of this insight, the ethnography of this Southeast European area offers a case in which these labor articulations emerge above all from the desaturation of the aforementioned elements. Material flows and space configurations display the multiplication, heterogeneization and disaggregation of territorial borders. Regional, national and transnational economical arenas and political agendas permeate Mala Prespa, intersecting with powerful global processes making the previous state performances obsolete. At the same time, villagers consider themselves as inhabiting a periphery which is portrayed exactly as the place where all these elements do not penetrate.

On the one hand, Mala Prespa manifests the legacy and decline of its past as geopolitical buffer zone with a slow economic activity, as many “protected zones” under military control which characterize many borderlands alongside the Iron Curtain. On the other hand, the fieldwork especially shed light on far more compelling issues. The changes in the local economy and in space orienting elements mutually suggest a problematic process of transition, structurally going towards a new productive model which alternates collaboration and competition, traditional techniques with new desires, subsistence economy with peripheral and partly ephemeral market-oriented efforts. Within and beyond the Albanian state borders, the contemporary Mala Prespa region seems characterized by the centrality of subsistence modes of production. Nonetheless, these co-exist with and within a market economy, which seems both interdependent and concurrent with self-sufficiency practices. The local social economy

shows in its configuration many features of a “peasant society” (Shanin 1966), characterized by the re-emergence of productive activities based on familistic models – mainly oriented toward self-provisioning and sharing of food – within a growing importance of the commodity circulation of goods and services.

The examples of this tension are also expressed by the impact of productive activities on the landscape. These show a particular form of the “ambiguous relation” (Narotzky 2015) which characterizes rural social economies, oscillating between autonomy and dependence. Firstly, self-sufficiency is sought through the enduring importance of micro-institutional, domestic, and informal economies, which can be similarly detected in many rural and peripheral areas of post-socialist contexts (Gudeman and Hann 2015). Zrnosko offers in this sense fascinating examples of sustainable management of the land, and of an organic interaction between human beings and environment. Secondly, the disruption of previous services and infrastructures occasionally line up with the promises of new ones. Governmental and non-governmental actors re-appear occasionally with new landscaping projects, centered on promoting the touristic conversion of the local economy. As confirmed by interviewees, these interventions ended proving the contemporary disarticulation of relations between these institutions and the territory. For migrants as well as for villagers, the state is usually not considered a relevant mediator for the local social cooperation, nor for the wealth-making opportunities that, where possible, continue in diverse forms to be disengaged from positive links to the government. Few other investments arrived on this part of the lake – excluding the St. Marina monastery – but locals implicated in rural tourism businesses willfully expect them as an aid for “leading more modern lives thanks to representations of tradition” (Sudetic and Moric 2016, 25).

In this article, we tested the idea that both local geography and economy – or, better, their interaction – influence perceptions on the organization of space among inhabitants, mutually revealing their forms of cultural appropriation and socialization of the land. It resulted in navigating a century-old landscaping process, and exploring the current coexistence of different regimes of labor and environmental strategies shaping the contemporary landscape. The village of Zrnosko appears in many senses as a *transitional space*, and it is interesting to highlight how many features of this condition can be traced within the new map of the village. For example, the three restaurants are located along three coordinates of this transformation: one is located on the road leading to the lake docking point. The second is situated along the main street of the village, next to the small local supermarket and one of the most intensively cultivated pieces of fenced land in the village, used by the owner to stock his restaurant. The biggest one, instead, is quite far from the other buildings and it is positioned on the road which lead to the other Albanian villages of Mala Prespa. It is built in the field along the unmarked line which used to divide the land managed by the Zrnosko cooperatives from that of Pustec. Ruderal, fragmented spots jut out from where the strings of the former integrated network are cut off. All the three gastronomic activities of the village started up by remittances and external sources of capital. The owner of the latter, Ilio, told us he started the new enterprise thanks to his lottery winnings, which allowed him to leave for America as an immigrant worker.¹⁰

During the fieldwork, we encountered locations in which embodied spatial practices and the shared moral geography seem to linger as residual aspects of a dying cultural landscape. In cases like Cerje’s, if the transition in space moves towards emptiness, the transition of time seems to move towards the end. Among those who live in these villages, the place is perceived

as soon disappearing from the map, as a place living an apocalypse without *eschaton*. They manifest as a group the fraying of any embodied form of *settling* (De Martino 2019),¹¹ namely the possibility of a point of contact between cultural landscape and existential horizons.

In the case of Zrnosko, the village is part of a complex social body, and it seems to be dialoguing with the territory as well as with its deterritorialization. Transitionality here appears not merely on a general chronological line, ambiguously headed towards the extinction of the village or towards a dream of future wellbeing. It is more visible in less shared meanings and coordinates, therefore in manifold chronotopes not arranging themselves within the landscape, but cohabiting as more competing, diffracted, non-cumulative ways over the social terrain, and beyond it. Here, narratives about the collective failure are usually associated, or more often juxtaposed, to that of individual successes. New symbolic boundaries also emerge to demarcate private spaces and new economic stratifications. Walking through the streets of the village, for example, the attention is drawn to the puppets hanging on the balconies of some of the taller houses. These puppets are usually called in Zrnosko *kukle*, or *majmunce*. Local equivalents of *dordolec* or *kokull*, spread in many other contexts of contemporary Albania (Peterson-Bidoshi 2006), these puppets protect from bad luck, the ‘evil eye’, as well as from the envious gazes of the neighbors.

The landscape of Zrnosko is also punctuated with three other elements. First, the big piles of oak branches, prepared using traditional techniques as a winter animal fodder. Second, the donkeys, which replaced the disappeared tractors, but also horses and oxen. As research participants explained to us, tractors need some maintenance and fuel, and they are of little use for small pieces of land. On the other side, bigger animals are too demanding and harder to manage for the elderly who work the fields, often alone – or, better, with the constant company of donkeys. Some forms of mutualism are still very active, as the cow sharing shows, as well as the use of traditional fertilization techniques, also due to the impossibility of accumulating the necessary capital to re-industrialize the agricultural production.

A third element of the contemporary landscape lies in the leaves of the ‘tea of Ivan’, the mountain tea harvested three times a year starting from the end of July. In the last few years, this herb started to be cultivated intensively, and became part of a brand-new attempt of building a local export market. It represents potential good business, reaching a broader market and a value, in the previous years, of around nine euros per kilo. Thus, it is sown pervasively in almost all the local fields, quickly leading to the deflation of its monetary value. At the same time, the villagers of Zrnosko still continue collecting the mountain tea (*po chai*) from the forests nearby. They usually keep these other leaves for themselves and for their more welcome guests, because ‘they smell better and are healthier than the ones we sell’.

Notes

¹ This article is the result of a project conceived during the 13th Border Crossings Network Summer School in Konitsa, Greece. The fieldwork was carried out in July and September 2018 in collaboration with Kristina Panova, Nefeli Polymerou, Rigas Dionysopoulos, Vassilis Nitsiakos, and Ljupčo Risteski, to whom our thanks go. The work originated as preliminary research to collect ethnographic data on the relationship between the local environment and productive activities, with the intent of prompting a broader ethnography of Mala Prespa, and of deepening the theoretical discussion on border-making and border-crossing processes. The article was jointly developed and edited in dialogue among the three authors; Petya V. Dimitrova took the lead in writing the first section, Bogdan D. Dražeta the central one, and Davide N. Carnevale the last section. We are also thankful to the reviewers, to Thomas Wilson, Monica Stroe and Lucrezia Stella for their careful comments, and to the communities in Mala Prespa for their hospitality and support.

² The elementary school of Zrnosko was closed four years before our field-research, and young people now attend school in Pustec and Korce.

³ The main settlements in the Albanian part of Mala Prespa are Pustec, Tuminec, Leska, Cerje, Globocheni, Shulin, Dolna Gorica, Gorna Gorica and Zrnosko. According to interviewees, today the region counts around 5000 people. Compared to the official demographics and documents we consulted, the research suggests that the population currently residing in most of the villages seems to be considerably lower than the registered one.

⁴ This name is usually used by the locals referring to the little boats they use for fishing and transportation. The name is originally related to the *chun*: the traditional Ohrid lake vessel.

⁵ The eldest sister was Vasilks and married in Pustec. The second one, Menka, married in Rosoman. Dolya, the third one, married in Cerje.

⁶ In addition to the medium and long-distance migration, the inhabitants of Mala Prespa are also immigrants in neighboring mountain regions across the border, where they usually work in construction or farms for short periods. Surprisingly, crossing international borders by boat is generally avoided, due to the controls and severe punishment for illegally trespassing on the lake. While the lake borders are (currently) well defined as international borders, land border-crossings seem to be more fluid.

⁷ These are Neda's memories. Originally from the village of Shulin, she is another one of the oldest women in Zrnosko (in her nineties too).

⁸ The abundance of toponyms related to the lake coast suggests us the *longue durée* role of this zone, which was an essential means of fertilization, as well as with husbandry or crop rotation/intercropping. The sustainable management of the coast also kept it as the main source of water, preventing lake eutrophication.

⁹ For further reading, see the introduction to this Special Issue (Carnevale and Wilson 2021).

¹⁰ Pustec offers another interesting example of the post-socialist transition in spaces. The local disco-pub, where the local youth usually meet now, is positioned where the club used to be during the socialist regime. The place where Valentina told us they ‘went to have fun, dance

and find who to marry’, is currently the gathering point of summer nostalgic meetings with drinks and chain-dances. Here, the local young boys who remained in Mala Prespa also have the occasion to complain with their migrated friends that ‘we don't have girls anymore here, they all went away’, attesting another aspect of the crisis in the social reproduction of these villages.

¹¹ We attempted here to translate the Italian word *appaesamento*, a central one in De Martino’s theory of the “loss of presence”.

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