

THE ENDURING PAST AND THE LANGUAGE OF MISUNDERSTANDING: MEMORY POLITICS AND THE CHAM QUESTION IN ALBANIAN–GREEK RELATIONS

PhD. Jordan JORGJI

*Faculty of Human and Natural Sciences
“Fan S. Noli” University, Korçë, Albania
jjorgji@unkorce.edu.al*

Abstract

This article examines the Cham question as a persistent legacy that complicates Albanian–Greek relations. It explores why and how the issue has become a taboo topic, and in what ways it continues to reproduce misunderstanding and mistrust. The analysis addresses three dimensions: collective memory and victimhood narratives; the reciprocity once linked to the Greek minority in Albania; and the current demands of Cham associations alongside the policies of both states. Drawing on theories of memory, nationalism, and asymmetry, the article conceptualizes the Cham question as a taboo. It argues that the reproduction of collective memories, and their transformation into taboos, are central mechanisms that sustain mistrust and constrain dialogue. Rather than remaining within a strictly historical narrative, the study approaches the Cham question through political theory, offering a fresh perspective on memory, nationalism, and asymmetry.

Keywords: *Cham question, collective memory, nationalism, Albania–Greece relations, counterbalancing logic, asymmetry.*

E KALUARA QË VAZHDON DHE GJUHA E MOSKUPTIMIT: POLITIKA E MEMORIES DHE PROBLEMI ÇAM NË MARRËDHËNIET SHQIPTARO–GREKE

Abstract

Ky artikull analizon problemin çam si një trashëgimi e vazhdueshme që vështirëson marrëdhëniet shqiptaro–greke. Pyetja që shtrohet është se pse dhe në ç’mënyrë ky problem është shndërruar në një temë tabu dhe si ai vazhdon të riprodhojë moskuptim dhe mosbesim në marrëdhëniet dypalëshe. Analiza fokusohet në tre dimensionë: kujtesën kolektive dhe narrativat e viktimizimit; reciprocitetin e dikurshëm, të lidhur me minoritetin grek në Shqipëri; si dhe kërkesat aktuale të shoqatave çame së bashku me politikat

respektive të dy shteteve. Duke u mbështetur në teoritë e kujtesës, nacionalizmit dhe asimetrisë, artikulli e konceptualizon problemin çam si një tabu. Ai argumenton se riprodhimi i kujtesave kolektive dhe shndërrimi i tyre në tabu janë mekanizma qendrorë që ushqejnë mosbesimin dhe kufizojnë dialogun. Në vend të një rrëfimi thjesht historik, ky studim e trajton problemin çam përmes teorisë politike, duke ofruar një këndvështrim të ri mbi kujtesën, nacionalizmin dhe asimetrinë.

Fjalët kyçe: *problemi çam, kujtesa kolektive, nacionalizmi, marrëdhënie shqiptaro-greke, logjika e kundërpeshës, asimetria.*

1. Introduction

Albanian–Greek relations have remained consistently difficult throughout 20th century and early 21st. Among the enduring legacies of the past, the Cham question stands out as one of the key factors complicating bilateral relations. The Albanian-speaking population of northwestern Greece, known as Chams, were both participants and victims of ethnic, religious, and local tensions during 1941–1945. Like other minority groups in interwar and wartime Europe, they became catalysts of inter-ethnic and inter-state tensions that marked the first half of the twentieth century. “Although the historical background of the Cham population during the interwar and World War II period is well documented in both Albanian and Greek historiographies, this article situates those events within their political and diplomatic consequences, rather than re-narrating them.

The central question of this study is why, and in what ways, the Cham question has persisted as a taboo topic in Albanian–Greek relations, and how it continues to reproduce bilateral misunderstanding and mistrust. To address this question, the article examines three main pillars: the role of collective memory, both inherited from the past and continuously nurtured; the counterbalancing logic linked to the Greek minority in Albania; and the contemporary demands of Cham associations, alongside the official policies of Albania and Greece.

The existing literature is fragmented and often shaped by national perspectives. Albanian historians such as Beqir Meta (2007) and Ndrim Kulla (2008) frame the question through narratives of victimhood, persecution, and ethnic cleansing, stressing the injustices committed against the Cham community. By contrast, Greek scholars

including Eleftheria Manta (2009, 2015) emphasize the role of the Cham population as collaborators with Axis forces during World War II and highlight the notion of collective responsibility.

Yet, while valuable for context, these works overlook its continued salience in shaping Albanian–Greek relations today. Recent policy-oriented studies (AIIS 2013, 2018, 2021; Rakipi 2018; Armakolas et al, 2021) focus on public perceptions, bilateral tensions, and European integration, but they lack a systematic theoretical framework.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to make an original contribution by shifting the focus from historical description to political theory. It conceptualizes the Cham question as both a frozen conflict and a taboo, analyzing it through lenses of collective memory, nationalism, and asymmetry in foreign policy. In particular, the article argues that the reproduction of collective memory, and its transformation into a taboo, are central mechanisms sustaining bilateral misunderstanding and mistrust between Albania and Greece.

This article seeks not only to reinterpret the Cham question but also to contribute to broader debates on how enduring historical legacies shape bilateral relations and diplomatic practices in Southeastern Europe. Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, synthesizing historical, legal, and policy sources through the lens of political theory. Rather than relying on new empirical data, it builds on secondary sources and theoretical frameworks to trace, through qualitative content analysis, how narratives, power asymmetries, and diplomatic discourse intersect in the evolution of the Cham question. This methodological sensitivity helps explain why the Cham question still resonates in policy debates, making it a prism through which similar disputes can be understood.

2. Theoretical background: Memory and nationalism

This section draws on theories of memory and nationalism to explain how contested pasts, victimhood narratives, and minority politics shape the Albania–Greece dispute over the Cham question.

Maurice Halbwachs emphasized that memory is central to both individual and collective life, shaping how identities are constructed and sustained. For Halbwachs, identity is not confined to ethnic belonging, but also extends to religion and social class, which frames

how communities remember the past. He illustrates this with the case of Israeli Jews and the memory of Masada (66–73 CE), which became a collective symbol of resistance and survival. Such examples demonstrate how memory transforms specific historical events into enduring narratives that cultivate group consciousness and reinforce political or cultural identities. (Halbwachs M., 1992, 33, 47, 87, 132). In Cham case, memory of wartime collaboration or expulsion is likewise mobilized to shape present identities on both sides of the border.

Along with Halbwachs' notion of the social construction of the past, Jan Assmann introduces two core concepts that highlight the dynamics of memory. The first is communicative memory, grounded in personal experiences and everyday interactions, which circulates orally and typically lasts for up to four generations after the events in question. Cultural memory, by contrast, is cultivated systematically by institutions such as the nation-state, the media, and intellectuals, and is transmitted through collective rituals, symbols, and commemorations. While communicative memory is related to the recent past and historical experiences, cultural memory aims to preserve and emotionally reframe the "absolute past." Assmann illustrates this distinction by contrasting the lived memory of generations who endured Nazi persecution with symbolic narratives that mythologize history, such as the Exodus in the Jewish tradition (Assmann J., 2011, 34–41). A similar interplay is visible in Albania, where personal stories of displacement among Cham families coexist with parliamentary resolutions and commemorative events that institutionalize cultural memory and shape diplomatic signaling.

Both Halbwachs and Assmann underline how feelings of blame and suffering reinforce the boundary between "us" and "them," thereby becoming significant triggers of collective memory in the defense of identities and political narratives. This dynamic lies at the core of victimhood narratives, through which communities interpret themselves primarily as victims of injustice while portraying the other as the perpetrator. (Halbwachs M., 1992, 109; Assmann J., 2011, 219). The mutual accusations between Albanians and Greeks over the Cham question exemplify this mechanism almost perfectly. This process not only reinforces polarized national identities but also fuels persistent misunderstanding and mistrust at the inter-state level.

According to Benedict Anderson, the fostering of collective consciousness is the core foundation of modern nation-states, which disseminate national ideology through education, public policy, and mass media. Nations, therefore, are “imagined communities” that share not only common narratives, identities, and collective memories but also collective amnesias (Anderson B., 2006, 114, 204). The persistent denial of Cham question in Greek official discourse can be seen as an instance of such selective forgetting, while in Albania the same process works in reverse through emphasis and commemoration. Rogers Brubaker argues that nation-states containing ethnic minorities often pursue a policy of “nationalizing nationalism,” seeking to integrate minorities into the dominant culture. At the same time, the external nation-states to which these minorities are historically or ethnically connected may engage in “homeland nationalism.” This produces what Brubaker calls a triangular relationship that is frequently problematic and conflictual: nationalizing states, where elites promote the dominance of language, culture, and political power; national minorities, whose elites strive to preserve their distinct linguistic and cultural characteristics; and external national homelands, whose elites monitor the treatment of co-ethnics abroad (Brubaker R., 1996, 56–57). This triangular dynamic is evident in the Albanian–Greek context: the Cham question has often been invoked as a counterweight to Greek claims regarding the rights of the Greek minority in Albania.

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye develop the concept of asymmetry in inter-state relations. They argue that when one state possesses greater power resources than another—whether in military, economic, or political terms, or through international and regional prestige—it enjoys a stronger bargaining position and can more easily accept or reject proposals. This asymmetry of interdependence thus becomes a key source of influence in foreign policy (Keohane R. O., & Nye J. S., 2012, 26). Concerning the Cham question, Greece enjoys a structural advantage over Albania by virtue of its membership in the European Union and NATO, as well as its greater economic and military development. This asymmetry enables Athens to dismiss or ignore Albanian positions on the Cham question.

In sum, these theoretical perspectives help explain how contested memories, victimhood narratives, and minority politics reproduce

asymmetry and miscommunication in Albanian–Greek relations. The Cham case illustrates this dynamic vividly: Albanians and Greeks narrate themselves as victims while casting the other as perpetrator; national identity is sustained through selective memory and forgetting; and minority politics unfold within a triangular relationship between nationalizing states, minorities, and kin-states. In this way, the Cham question exemplifies how contested memories and asymmetries of power continue to hinder reconciliation. At the same time, it sheds light on the wider impact that enduring historical legacies can have on shaping bilateral relations in Southeastern Europe. These theoretical frameworks are here applied to the Cham question as it developed within the historical context of World War II and its aftermath, when the intersection of local conflict and state policy defined the lasting legacies of mistrust.

3. Collective Memory, Victimhood, and National Narratives

Surveys conducted in 2021 in both Albania and Greece show that two-thirds of respondents considered the Cham question a major obstacle to the further development of bilateral relations. (Armakolas I., et al, 2021, 52-55; Gjeta A., 2021, 24). Similar results were recorded in surveys carried out in 2013 and 2018. (Çela A., & Lleshaj S., 2014, 21; Rakipi A., 2018, 21-22). The roots of this attitude lie not only in historical events themselves but also in their biased interpretation and reproduction through historiography and the media. The collective memory of both Greeks and Albanians—including the Cham community—has been constructed around national narratives of their own victimization, while simultaneously attributing the image of “bloodthirsty murderers” to the other side. The dividing line between “us” and “them” has usually been drawn along national identity, and in the past also along religious identity. From the Greek perspective, the Chams are widely perceived as collaborators with the Italian and German occupiers during World War II, actively participating in crimes against the Greek Orthodox population, or welcoming the foreign armies during both world wars, harboring hopes of union with Albania (Manta E., 2015, 155; Baltsiotis L., 2011, 5–6). From the Albanian perspective, however, the Greek state is held responsible for serious crimes committed against the Cham

community, often labeled as acts of genocide. (Meta B., 2007, 134; Krisafi K., 2014, 219-220).

The memory of the past, which is more cultural than communicative, is further entrenched through the use of emotional language in respective historiographies. A highly polemical rhetoric is employed by the Albanian publicist Ndriçim Kulla, who portrays the Cham experience as one of genocide and religious discrimination, even comparing Greek policy to that of Nazi Germany toward the Jews during World War II. (Kulla N., 2008, 81-82). Similarly, Chariton Labrou and G. Th. Papamanolis, writing in the 1940s–1950s, described the Chams with overt racial overtones. (Margaritis G., 2005, 137; Lambrou H., 1949, 19, 29).

The media have also played a major role in preserving and cultivating these memories, through television broadcasts in both countries and the vast circulation of information on the internet (Mema M., 2019; Michani tou Chronou, 2023). Both the use of extreme rhetoric and its reproduction through mass media and other channels of communication, further fuel the nationalism underpinning modern nation-states and their collective consciousness, as argued by Anderson and Brubaker. These polarized memories were further reinforced during the Cold War, when ideological divisions between Albania and Greece deepened mistrust and perpetuated antagonistic national narratives.

4. Counterbalancing in Minority Politics

From the 1920s until World War II, there was a degree of symmetry between the Cham community in northwestern Greece and the Greek minority in southern Albania, as both were recognized as minority populations. This counterbalancing logic was particularly evident after the regime of Theodoros Pangalos in Greece (1925–1926).

At that time, the Albanian government proposed the exchange of the Greek minority population in southern Albania with the Chams of Epirus, an idea raised with the Greek side during the implementation of the 1923 Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations (Manta E., 2009, 526; Repishti S., 2014, 45). The proposal failed to materialize, and both countries continued to engage in triangular relations, a dynamic that reflects Brubaker's notion of

triangular relations between nationalizing states, national minorities, and external homelands.

After World War II, when the Chams had fled in masse to Albania, and especially since the 1990s, successive Albanian governments sought to place the Cham question on the bilateral agenda with Greece, while Athens consistently rejected it. As a result, an asymmetrical position was established between Greece, an EU and NATO member, and Albania, a country emerging from long isolation and economic weakness.

This new reality—recalling Keohane and Nye’s concept of asymmetry in inter-state relations prior to the dynamics of economic interdependence—reduced Albania’s leverage in foreign policy toward Greece, due to Greece’s unconditional and continuous rejection of the Cham question. In times of tense relations and rising nationalism, this vacuum results in mutual allegations of human rights violations. In the early 1990s, as Tirana sought to restore political counterbalancing with Greece, Prime Minister Aleksandër Meksi publicly requested that Athens recognize the Chams, Arvanites, and Albanian immigrants collectively as a single Albanian minority. (Manta E., 2015, 236–240).

Another manifestation of rhetorical counterbalancing can be seen in official Greek statements. Unlike Albanian diplomacy, Athens has the leverage to exert pressure on Albania—whether by linking the Greek minority to its European integration process or by raising additional demands—whenever Tirana attempts to advance the Cham question on the bilateral agenda (Giannakou M., 2017, 49–50; Zeneli B., 2018, 478). This pattern underscores the enduring asymmetry of power that shapes Albanian–Greek relations.

5. Taboo Issues and the Limits of Albanian–Greek Dialogue

This chapter examines how the Cham question has gradually evolved into a taboo in Albanian–Greek relations, narrowing the scope of diplomatic dialogue. It concerns the demands of Cham associations and the political positions of the two states. Here, two main periods should be distinguished: the years before 1945 and the years after. During the first period, when the Chams still lived in Greece, their demands centered on the protection of minority rights—particularly religious freedom, education, and local administration. Above all,

they demanded the restitution or compensation of properties that had been sold or transferred during the population-exchange process of 1923–1925, when the Chams were initially classified as ‘exchangeable’ under the Greek–Turkish Convention, but were later declared ‘non-exchangeable’ and obliged to remain in Greece without recovering their alienated assets. (Katsikas S., 2013, 155, 171-172).

Today, the minimal expectation of Tirana’s policy is the commemoration of the Chams who perished during World War II—thus neutralizing their collective blame as collaborators with foreign occupiers—while the maximal expectation is financial compensation for confiscated properties. (Nazarko M., 2007, 81-109). The remaining properties were confiscated by decision of the Special Court of Ioannina, which issued wartime-crimes determinations, after many cham people had left—or been expelled in masse—from Greece. None of them returned until the end of the 20th century, not even those who had not been convicted by the court. Even after the fall of communism in Albania, opportunities for Albanians of Cham origin to travel freely to Greece remained severely constrained. (Vickers M., 2002, 239-240).

Unlike the early 1990s, when Tirana gave some support to property claims, official policy later became more moderate. The change reflected Albania’s new priorities in the post-Cold War era, particularly European integration and the challenges of democratization. In 2018, Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati stated that “the commemorative right in the Greek state will of course be fulfilled,” implying that Albania might request the erection of an obelisk in Greece in memory of the fallen Chams (Vasili E., 2018). This suggests that commemoration represents the symbolic floor of Albania’s diplomatic persistence with Greece.

Nonetheless, Albanian governments have often been tempted by Cham rhetoric, particularly during electoral campaigns. An illustrative example is the “Cham resolution,” adopted by the Albanian parliament in 2004 but was published in the Official Journal only nine years later, in June 2013, at a time when the Cham party, PDIU, had become an influential actor. (Official Journal of the Republic of Albania, 2013).

The resolution acknowledged the generally positive climate in relations with Greece—considered a strategic ally, home to several

hundred thousand Albanians, and a key player in Albania's European integration—yet also insisted that discussion of the Cham question should focus on financial compensation for seized properties, including those frozen under the Law 2664/1998 on the Greek Cadaster.

Athens' consistent refusal to address the Cham question, combined with Albania's at times instrumental use of the case, has transformed it into a taboo subject in Greek–Albanian relations. In this sense, the Cham question constitutes a clear limit to bilateral dialogue, a boundary further reinforced by Albania's overriding priority of EU accession. Its transformation into a taboo illustrates how enduring legacies impose rigid boundaries on bilateral dialogue.

It should also be noted that the Cham question belongs to the broader category of forced population movements that took place irreversibly in the first decades of the 20th century—particularly at the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War—both in Europe and elsewhere. (Baltisiotis L., 2004, 64). Mass deportations were not an exception but a recurring phenomenon. Comparable examples include the exodus of Poles and of German-speaking populations from various countries. (Petacco A., 2005, 132-134; Paikert G. C., 1962, 16-18; Glassheim E., 2016, 43-44).

6. Conclusion

The Cham question continues to cast a long shadow over Albanian–Greek relations, not as a mere historical dispute but as a politically charged and diplomatically sensitive question. Its persistence demonstrates how enduring legacies of the past become embedded in the structures of bilateral relations, constraining dialogue and reproducing mistrust across generations. Specifically, the way in which collective memories are reproduced and framed as taboo has contributed directly to the reproduction of bilateral misunderstanding and mistrust.

Three dynamics stand out from this study. First, Albanians and Greeks both narrate themselves as victims, while projecting guilt onto the other side. Historiography, political rhetoric, and the media have played a decisive role in maintaining these polarized narratives. This process reflects the mechanisms of selective remembering and forgetting described by Halbwachs, Assmann, and Anderson, and it

explains why surveys from 2013, 2018, and 2021 continue to show that public opinion treats the Cham question as a major obstacle to cooperation.

Second, whereas in the interwar years the Cham community in Greece and the Greek minority in Albania served as counterweights, this balance dissolved after World War II. Greece's position as an EU and NATO member, combined with its stronger economy and regional influence, has left Albania with limited diplomatic leverage. Brubaker's triangular model of nationalizing states, minorities, and external homelands, alongside Keohane and Nye's concept of asymmetrical interdependence, illuminates this enduring imbalance.

Third, what might once have been framed as a question of property compensation has become politically untouchable. Athens consistently refuses to discuss the matter, while Tirana has at times used it instrumentally, especially in domestic politics. The 2013 parliamentary resolution illustrates this ambivalence: while acknowledging Greece as a strategic ally and key to EU integration, it simultaneously insisted on property claims. The very exclusion of the Cham question from official dialogue shows how taboos set limits to bilateral relations.

By moving beyond historical description and anchoring the analysis in political theory, this study highlights how memory politics, nationalism, and asymmetry converge to produce diplomatic deadlocks. Like other population movements, it persists as an enduring legacy in inter-state relations. Future research might further explore how similar enduring legacies function as taboos in other Balkan or European contexts.

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