Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo
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CHAPTER 5
The Making of Egyptians in Kosovo and Macedonia

“I argue that identity, considered ethnographically, must always be mixed, relational, and inventive. (...) Identity is conjunctural, not essential” (Clifford 1988:10-11).

In the spring of 1991, when Yugoslavia was on the brink of war, I came across some surprising articles in the Yugoslav press on a new ethnic group. In Kosovo and Macedonia, thousands of ‘Egyptians’ were reported to exist, who declared themselves to have settled here centuries ago. It was the first time I heard of them. I knew of Albanians, Serbs and Macedonians, and a number of other ethnic groups existing here, such as Turks, Slavic Muslims, Vlachs and even Circassians. However, these (Muslim) Egyptians were almost completely new to me. Almost, because in August 1990 I met a few ‘proto’-Egyptians at the Serbian monastery of Gračanica, without really giving their contentions serious attention. It was on a warm day in August, during Assumption Day, when the famous medieval sanctuary is visited by numerous pilgrims (see chapter 2). As every year, there were countless Muslim Gypsies visiting the shrine, but some of them, with whom I was able to talk, denied they were Ciganî. “Our origins are unknown, although there are indications that we are either Greeks or Egyptians”, they explained to me. At that moment, to be honest, I did not take these claims seriously at all. One year later, when I went to the Egyptian embassy in Belgrade, the cultural attaché told me that his reaction had been similar. He and his colleagues had been astonished and amused, not knowing whether this phenomenon was to be interpreted as a practical joke or not. Despite serious doubts about the authenticity of the claims of the Yugoslav Egyptians, the ambassador invited them twice, in 1990 and 1991, on the official celebration of the Egyptian national feast on 23 July.

Since their entry in the Yugoslav ethnic pandemonium, the Egyptians have regularly attracted attention in the Yugoslav press. In their endeavours to become visible as a group they
have used strategies that are very common among ethnic movements: they published a book of their own folk-stories, legends and customs, which put flesh on their identity claims, and provided the 'cultural stuff' that is needed to make these claims more credible. In the spring of 1991, they offered the book to the Egyptian ambassador in Belgrade. In December 1991, they issued an official statement after Boutros Ghali’s election as Secretary-General of the United Nations. As he is a Copt from Egypt, they proudly congratulated him, and asked him to do his utmost to solve the Yugoslav crisis peacefully. In Egypt too interest was aroused: Egyptian television made a documentary on this burgeoning Egyptian community on the other side of the Mediterranean. In June 1992, the Macedonian Egyptians were demanding their own radio and television programs.

Let me turn to the inevitable questions raised by the unexpected appearance of these Egyptians. How can we explain the emergence of this apparently new national minority, and what is its background? Which people are involved and why do they claim to be Egyptian? What

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1 The book was actually written by Stojan Risteski, a Macedonian from Ohrid, who is one of the main defenders of their cause (Risteski 1991).

2 The information presented here is primarily based on press-reports (Chuck Sudetic, “Pharaohs in Their Past? So the Yugoslavs Say”, in: The New York Times, 21 November 1990, A4; Der Spiegel 15 October 1990; Dnevnik 28 October 1990; Novosti 28 October 1990; Borba 18 September 1991, 3 December 1991, 6 December 1991, 8 June 1992). I have also used additional data provided by Poulton (1991:91). Barany mentions the Egyptians in a recent article about the position of the Gypsies in Macedonia (1995:517-518), but he does not provide any new information on them. The last news I heard is very recent: during the peace negotiations in Rambouillet in France (February 1999), Čerim Abazi, an Egyptian representative from Priština, was member of the Serbian delegation (Vreme, 13 February 1999, p.11). Because my work as an anthropologist has been largely confined to Kosovo, I have not had access to the Macedonian press on this topic. Thus, the reader should keep in mind that I am primarily acquainted with the Serbian point of view (using mostly Serbian sources). The rest of my analysis, in which I deal with the background of the phenomenon, is also mainly based on my knowledge of the situation in Kosovo. This means that I may be ignorant about some particularities of this phenomenon in Macedonia. Nevertheless, I believe that the parameters of this phenomenon in both areas are largely the same, at least for the period which is most central to my analysis (1990-1992).
evidence and arguments do they put forward in order to claim Egyptian origin? Are the Egyptians in Kosovo and Macedonia really new — and is our astonishment warranted — or has their existence a previous history that was concealed and of which we have not been aware? Were they perhaps a ‘silenced’ group which has now become vocal and visible? In the analysis which follows, I will show that the Egyptians in the former Yugoslavia did not appear out of the blue: there is a long history of ‘Egyptian’ presence in the Balkans, which has survived in locally and regionally defined identities. What is relatively new (since the beginning of the 1980s) is that these local groups of so-called Egyptians have started to develop a national consciousness which transcends narrow local confines, an ‘imagined community’ which goes beyond the level of face-to-face contacts (Anderson 1991). The basis for this process of ‘national awakening’ was laid in Macedonia (in particular in Ohrid), where Egyptians existed as distinct local groups before. Only recently, when they called for recognition as an ethnic category within the last Yugoslav census of 1991, have their claims attracted wide attention. For the first time, their demands were taken seriously, including by the state authorities. I will show that this development had an important ethno-political background, which incited other groups to become Egyptians as well, although they lacked the consciousness of being ‘Egyptian’ before. This latter development has been more characteristic for the Egyptians in Kosovo.

**The ethnonym ‘Egyptian’**

Analysing the phenomenon of the Egyptians in the Balkans more closely, it is not so unusual as it may seem at first sight. From the end of the fourteenth century, ethnonyms derived from ‘Egyptian’ have been widely used for Gypsies, who have since then spread over Europe. The English term ‘Gypsy’ is etymologically derived from this, as are its equivalents in many other languages: like *Gitano* in Spanish, *Gitan* in French and *Kipti* in Turkish. In the Balkans too the ethnonym ‘Egyptian’ has been preserved, although it is not dominant everywhere. In Albania,
Gypsies are called *Evjiëtë* or *Magjypë*, both derivations of ‘Egyptian’. In former Yugoslavia, apart from the official label *Romi* and the more popular but potentially pejorative term *Cigani*, a number of local and regional expressions exist, all referring to Egypt: *Egipćani, Edjup(c)i, Adjupci, Gopti, Gipteri, Kipti, Faraoni* and *Firauni* (Vukanović 1983:137-148). These designations can be translated with respectively ‘Egyptians’, ‘Copts’ and ‘People of the Pharaoh’.

It is not exactly clear why Gypsies were called by such names, although there has been a good deal of speculation. From some historical documents we know that Gypsy chiefs arriving at the city gates of fifteenth-century European towns presented themselves as ‘Dukes of Egypt’ or ‘Dukes of Little-Egypt’. Accordingly, until the nineteenth century many believed that they came from Egypt, although doubts about these claims arose soon. At the end of the eighteenth century, tsiganologists formulated the now widely accepted theory of an Indian origin for the Gypsies (on the basis of linguistic findings), which necessitated an alternative explanation for the ethnonym. One of the most popular theories was that Gypsies borrowed their name from a region in Greece called ‘Little Egypt’ (cf. ‘Asia Minor’). According to this view, Gypsies first settled here before spreading over the rest of Europe (Clébert 1961:20, Liégeois 1986:28-29). But this theory is itself not much more convincing, as Winstedt pointed out as early as the beginning of this century: it is almost without doubt, he says, that the name ‘Little Egypt’ applied to the huge Gypsy colony at Modon in Greece (present-day Methoni, on the south-west coast of the Peloponnese). As a geographical designation, it almost certainly came into being only after Gypsies had settled there (1909-1910:61). In Byzantium and Greece, the practice of calling Gypsies ‘Egyptians’ was already well established at that time (Soulis 1961:150).

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3 For Albanian, as well as for Serbo-Croat, I give the terms in the plural.

4 The first two terms originate etymologically from the ancient Greek *Aigyptos*. In the seventh century, the Arab conquerors of Egypt made this into *Kibl*, refering to the Christian inhabitants of Egypt. From this Arabic name the term Copt originates (Atiya 1986).
In the fourteenth century, Gypsies settled down primarily in Venetian colonies, because these territories enjoyed relative stability and security (Fraser 1992:50). Modon was one of them: a seaport on the south-west coast of the Peloponnese with probably the most important Gypsy settlement of that time. Furthermore, it was an important stopping place for pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. According to Fraser, this is probably the clue to the reason that Gypsies presented themselves as pilgrims, as soon as they arrived in Western Europe. Fraser suggests that they adopted this guise “when they needed a cover-story to facilitate their arrival” (1992:53). In places like Modon they gained familiarity with the Christian world and discovered that pilgrims were privileged travellers: “By claiming to be penitents and pilgrims, the Gypsies could ensure that they were received with a warmer welcome than they had enjoyed hitherto” (1992:63). In addition, in this way Gypsies were able to obtain letters of recommendation (from the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund and also allegedly from the Pope) with which they could cross frontiers more easily and were permitted to stay and to obtain some basic support.

In Fraser’s eyes, the pilgrim’s guise with its concomitant ‘cover-story’ was the greatest trick ever employed by Gypsies, in their long history of survival through strategies of superficial assimilation and outright deception:

“It was as if some unsung genius, stimulated perhaps by all the pressures in the Balkans, had realised the potential advantages to be drawn from the religious environment of the time and had devised a strategy for exploiting it and enhancing the prospects of survival” (1992:62).

However, Fraser does not really provide an explanation for the fact that Gypsy leaders called themselves Dukes of Egypt. Why Dukes? Why exactly Egypt? It’s safe to assume that these Gypsy leaders made up their titles, as part of their general strategy to gain acceptance among the Christian host populations and political leaders. Probably they took upon themselves a royal title because they were seeking favourable treatment from nobles and kings. As far as Egypt is concerned, their appearance forced them to think of an exotic homeland, which, in addition, would be meaningful in medieval Christian eyes. In the Europe of that time, Egypt was probably
one of the few exotic places that were by and large known to everybody. Moreover, it had a
certain magic, as is pointed out by Clébert: well before the arrival of the Gypsies in Europe “all
mountebanks and travelling showmen found themselves dubbed ‘Egyptians’” (1967:27). Egypt
was the classical homeland of magicians, and as also Fraser suggests, “Egypt’s arcane
associations with occultism and divination” may have helped create this legend of Egyptian
origin (1992:48). I think that Egypt earned its reputation in particular from its prominent role in
the Bible, in the Old Testament (Genesis and Exodus). Egypt is the place where God’s chosen
people are enslaved and finally threatened with extinction; it forms the central stage for the battle
between Moses and the Pharaoh, who forcibly prevents the people of Israel from leaving Egypt.
With the help of God Moses succeeds, but not before winning a lengthy trial of strength with the
wisest men and magicians of Egypt, resulting in the ten successive plagues of Egypt. In this
famous Bible story Egypt symbolises above all pride, ignorance and even blasphemy: qualities
that are repeatedly put to shame by Moses who thereby upholds and glorifies the true faith. In
medieval eyes (Old) Egypt was probably one of the most obvious symbolic and ideological
adversaries of Christianity.5

In my view, the Gypsies referred to this well-known biblical toponym, constructing a
plausible and acceptable identity for that time. Early sources attest that they presented themselves
as pagans, coming from Egypt, who had dared to challenge or even to abandon the Christian faith
and who now were doing penance for this by a seven-years’ pilgrimage. They were cursed, but
by creating an image of infidels who had adopted the hair shirt they in fact paid homage to
Christianity. In this way, they created maximum space for manoeuvring, not only in the literal
(spatial) sense: as Egyptians, they were expected not to comply too strictly with the Christian
rules and prohibitions. Although they were regarded with suspicion and disapproval, it is likely
that they were initially given the benefit of the doubt. Only later were Gypsies increasingly
stereotyped as spies in the service of the Turks (Kenrick & Puxon 1972:21, Fraser 1992:151).

5 In early Islam Ancient Egypt performed the same symbolic function as the adversary of the true faith. In the Quran,
the Pharaoh is “the archetype of the pagan oppressor of God’s people” (Lewis 1987:27).
Nonetheless, up until the present day many Gypsy myths of origin have been put in biblical terms, alluding to well-known biblical events, in particular to Exodus and Christ’s crucifixion. Probably one of the most widespread is the myth that the Gypsies are the descendants of a young man and woman who were part of Pharaoh’s troops that followed Moses through the Red Sea. While the rest of Pharaoh’s army was drowned they survived by a miracle and became the Adam and Eve of the Gypsies (Clébert 1961:16-21). Between the two World Wars, the Serbian ethnographer Tihomir Djordjević gathered versions of the same myth in Yugoslavia. Here, the Bible story about Moses and the Pharaoh is reflected in the various legends about a Gypsy empire that existed long ago, headed by the mighty czar Firaun. After challenging God he was severely punished, and was drowned at sea together with his army. The few survivors are the ancestors of the present-day Gypsies (Djordjević 1984b).\(^6\)

Whether the Gypsies really designed their ambiguous Egyptian identity as rationally as is suggested here, remains unanswered. It was probably a process of trial and error, in which the several basic elements of their ‘cover story’ were tested and combined, before it eventually crystallised into the versions we know. Among scholars, the Egyptian myth was discarded by the end of the eighteenth century, when linguists discovered many resemblances between Romani and other Indic languages: the findings strongly suggested Indian origins for the Gypsies. Currently this is an almost universally accepted view, among scholars as well as among Gypsies all over the world, including in former Yugoslavia (see for instance Djurić 1987:13-31, Poulton 1993:44). Nevertheless, general claims made on the basis of this Indian ‘myth’ should be approached with some scepticism, as Judith Okely (1983) and more recently the Dutch historians Leo Lucassen (1990) and Wim Willems (1995) have argued. In short, they all express doubts about the Gypsies’ alleged single Indian origin, and argue that the term ‘Gypsy’ has been primarily an outsider’s label, used indiscriminately for people more or less permanently wandering. Some might also have adopted the Gypsy identity voluntarily for ‘professional’

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\(^6\) This myth has a long tradition in the Balkans, as is shown in a fragment of the *Seyahat-name* (Book of Travels) of the famous seventeenth-century Turkish traveller Evliya Çelebi (see Friedman & Dankoff 1991:4-5).
reasons, in order to earn money as exotic fortune tellers for instance (Okely 1983:3-4). In short, they argue that the Gypsies have incorporated disparate individuals and groups of various, often non-Indian, and autochthonous origin. Although Fraser does not go so far as to dismiss the Indian thesis, he acknowledges the fact that Gypsies form a “rich mosaic of ethnic fragments” (1992:9). Especially in the Balkans, there is a situation of an extreme complexity, in which various criteria like language, religion and occupation have generated numerous subdivisions and ramifications among Gypsies (1992: 292-293). These groups, which are designated by outsiders as ‘Gypsies’, often define themselves in quite other terms. The ‘Egyptians’ in former Yugoslavia might be seen as a very recent and at the same time special example.

The Egyptians in Yugoslavia

The Egyptians\(^8\) in Kosovo and Macedonia deny categorically that they are Gypsies, and indeed claim antique Egyptian origins. In 1990, they founded their own associations, first in Ohrid (Macedonia) —where the Egyptians have a longer history— and later in Priština (Kosovo), where they have emerged quite unexpectedly, even to the Egyptian leaders in Ohrid (Ljubisavljević 1990:35). Their primary stated goal was to bring a halt to the process of Albanianization taking place in western Macedonia and Kosovo. The total number of Egyptians who have since then joined these associations is about 10,000, almost equally divided over Kosovo and Macedonia. At the founding assembly of the Kosovo branch, held in October 1990, one of the leading members declared with unlimited optimism that their total number would probably turn out to be more than 100,000 people (Djordjević 1990; see also Poulton 1991:91

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\(^7\) See also Lockwood (1985), who gives a clear picture of these complex ethnic subdivisions, especially for Yugoslavia.

\(^8\) Although it is questionable whether these Yugoslav ‘Egyptians’ are indeed of Egyptian origin, I will call them that, without constantly using inverted commas. It should be clear that we are dealing with controversial and disputable claims.
and Fraser 1992:298). According to the Egyptian leaders in Ohrid, they established a similar association ten years ago, shortly before the 1981 Yugoslav census. Their aim had been to gain official recognition as a nationality (narodnost) to be included in the census questionnaires as a separate ethnic category. Although their demands had not been granted by the government of Macedonia, at least 200 of them declared themselves Egyptians, thus ending up in the category ‘unknown’ (Friedman 1985:53; Ljubisavljević 1990:34).

In 1990, the federal authorities announced the next census, which took place in April 1991 (the last census held in the former Yugoslavia). The Egyptians used the opportunity to express their demands anew, among other things by offering petitions to the federal assembly, as well as to the Serbian and Macedonian national assemblies. One of the results was that their struggle for recognition did not pass unnoticed; they attracted quite some attention in the press, and furthermore, their demands were partly granted by the Serbian and Macedonian authorities: during the next census, the officials promised, the Egyptians could officially register as such. Actually, this concession did not mean much, because the Yugoslav census system always provided the possibility to register according to personal preferences, for instance as an inhabitant of a certain region or town (or as Homo Sapiens, as some did). However, as these idiosyncratic categories were denied recognition by the state, and they were usually grouped as ‘others’, ‘regional’ or ‘unknown’ in the census results, lacking political significance. In the case of the Egyptians, however, the authorities made one small step in the direction of recognition, by allowing the category of Egipčani to be used in the census codex, thereby enabling the exact assessment of their number and the separate processing of other data related to them (Risteski

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9 In federal Yugoslavia, an official distinction was made between narodi (‘state’ nations) and narodnosti (nationalities). Apart from this distinction, some republican constitutions (like the Serbian and Macedonian ones) used a third category, etničke grupe (ethnic groups). This last category was reserved for minor ethnic groups, Gypsies being by far the largest one. Each category had specific political rights: narodi (like the Croats and the Serbs) had their own republics, narodnosti (like Albanians and Hungarians) did not, because they possessed their ‘own’ national states outside Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, in the 1960s the main nationalities obtained substantial autonomy. The third category remained an extremely vague constitutional concept, without specific rights (Acković 1992).
1991:7-10). On the other hand, the authorities made also clear that this concession still did not imply special minority rights. As far as I know only Macedonia published the census figures for Egyptians: the 1991 figures list 3,307 Egyptians in Macedonia. For Serbia (present-day ‘Yugoslavia’), only the preliminary results of the census have been published, without any mention of the Egyptians. Whether they will ever be published is questionable. In Kosovo the census was in any case largely a failure because of the massive boycott by the Albanians (Moore 1992:7).

Although many consider them to be Gypsies Egyptians resist this label quite determinedly. They put forward a number of arguments which they say ‘proves’ their non-Gypsy identity. In the first place, they live in the historic centres of towns as Ohrid and Bitola, whereas most Gypsies have settled in separate and often very poor Gypsy quarters or suburban ghettos. Secondly, they claim to have a relatively high standard of living; they do not suffer much from unemployment, whereas the average Gypsy only can dream of this. Thirdly, they say they have always formed a specific group of specialised craftsmen. Traditionally they worked as blacksmiths, but now they are turning towards more sophisticated professions which require higher education. Nowadays, many young Egyptians have become doctors or engineers. Finally, though they are Muslims, they are (in their own words) more ‘developed’ and ‘modern’, not only compared to Gypsies but also to Albanians. They have abolished the ‘medieval norms’ of

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10 The (preliminary) results of the 1994 Macedonian census list 3169 Egyptians. I would like to thank Victor Friedman for providing me with these data (see also Barany 1995:517-518).

11 It should be noted that the blacksmith’s craft has always been a typical gypsy occupation. The well known Serbian ethnographer Tihomir Djordjević once argued that it is precisely this craft that has put the Gypsies apart, preserving them as a distinct ethnic group. Non-Gypsies never engaged in this profession, at least in Serbia and Montenegro. For our case here, Djordjević’s remarks about Gypsy blacksmiths in Ulcinj (Montenegro) are of special interest. Like the Egyptians in Kosovo and Macedonia, they were Albanophone and refused to be labelled as Gypsies. Since it was clear that they were neither Albanians nor Serbs, they called themselves kovači (blacksmiths) (Djordjević 1984a:11). It
Islam, especially those pertaining to women. It is clear that all these arguments can be regarded as symbolic attempts to shake off the stigma that is attached to Gypsy identity.

Apart from these arguments (quoted in: Lazović & Nikolić Pisarev 1990), Egyptians point to the oral traditions which their old people seem to have maintained. According to these traditions Egyptians were among the earliest inhabitants of the Balkans. During the reign of Alexander the Great (fourth century BC) they immigrated to the Balkans, where they founded Little-Egypt. From there they spread to other parts of the Balkans and eventually arrived at the shores of Lake Ohrid. In the following centuries other Egyptians followed their example, moving along Roman roads like the Via Ignatia. The Ohrid Egyptians claim to be among the founders of this small, beautiful, and historically important town. They also claim that in other Balkan towns as well as in Sicily one can still find Egyptians, who can be recognised by their dark skin. All are alleged to be the descendants of groups of old-Egyptians who created a ‘ring’ of Egyptian settlements along the main trade roads between the Ionian and Adriatic seas. Unfortunately, they have forgotten their own language, and adopted the languages of the indigenous populations. For that reason, the Ohrid Egyptians (who are predominantly Albanophone) do not consider Albanian their mother tongue but merely as what they call their *kućni jezik* (home language) (Damnjanović 1990).

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12 I only know of one author mentioning Egyptians in Balkan towns prior to the Slavic invasions: Fine (1983:12). As I did not attempt to find additional evidence, more data can probably be found in the historical literature. In April 1991, Tanjug (the Belgrade-based official Yugoslav press agency) issued a press release in connection with the Egyptians, mentioning Vatican documents which were said to state that many Egyptians were brought to Macedonia in the fourth century AD, as foot soldiers and horsemen (*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* EE/1043 B/17, 11 April 1991).
Serbian and Macedonian support for the Egyptians

From the moment of their appearance the Egyptians won sympathy and support, especially among Macedonians and Serbs. In March 1991, Stojan Risteski, a scholar from Ohrid (Macedonia), published a book titled *Narodni prikazi, predanija i obichai kaj Egipkjanite / Egjupcije vo Makedonija* (folk stories, legends and customs among the Egyptians in Macedonia), in which the author attempts to buttress their claims with ethnographic data. A number of Serbian journalists and scholars spoke in favour of them in the months preceding the 1991 census. According to the German weekly *Der Spiegel* (15 October 1990), Serbia’s president Slobodan Milošević supported their demands, claiming that more than half of Kosovo’s Albanians are actually Egyptians, who were forced to renounce their identity under Albanian pressure (I have not been able to verify this information). To give an example of the warm Serbian support for the Egyptian case, I will quote from an article by the two Serbian journalists, Lazović & Nikolić Pisarev:

“The life Egyptians lead is —under the present conditions in Yugoslavia— quite exceptional: they are always very helpful towards others and are receptive to all good influences of other nations. They live in colonies where they dedicate themselves without moaning to crafts that are, on close inspection, not very profitable. They abstain from any form of political activity and concentrate exclusively on their work. They are an unusual people that contrasts positively with all other nations of Yugoslavia. Characteristic for them is that they are a rare example of a nation whose members consciously adapt and assimilate and always try to prevent any conflict with society. They are extremely gentle, reliable and diligent” (Lazović & Nikolić Pisarev 1990:57).

Some Serbian scientists also supported the claims of the Egyptians in statements to the press, especially Rade Božović, a prominent Arabist at Belgrade University, and Miodrag Hadži-Ristić, an ethnologist working at the University of Skopje (Macedonia). Hadži-Ristić claimed he was able to interest important political and scientific institutions in Macedonia and Serbia (the Socialist Alliance of Macedonia, the Serbian Academy of Sciences, the Ethnographic Institute and the Etnographic Museum in Belgrade) in research into the origins and ethnogenesis of the
Egyptians. He talked to two biochemists who claimed that by blood tests it is possible to establish whether the Egyptians are different from Gypsies or not.\(^1\) Hadži-Ristić also stated in an interview that he had found archaeological traces of Egyptian or (to be more precise) Coptic presence in Macedonia. These consisted of unique earthen icons, which he claims were only ever produced by Copts (Lazović 1990).

In interviews, Rade Božović suggested that many beliefs, rituals and magical practices among the Macedonian Egyptians show close similarities with those of the Copts. In addition, although nominally Muslims, they celebrate Christian feasts like those of St Naum and St Athanas.\(^1\) The latter saint was bishop of Alexandria (Egypt) in the fourth century AD. Furthermore, Božović has stated that the Egyptians show a pronounced preference for uneven numbers in their ritual practices, especially the number three, which they share with the ancient Egyptians. Other so-called proof is provided by the ‘Egyptian’ graves found on the Stogovo-mountains (West Macedonia), in the vicinity of a former manganese mine. According to oral tradition Egyptians worked there as slaves. In an unpublished paper on the Egyptians, Božović seems to be more cautious in assuming continuity, although he again sees many parallels in the ritual practices of the Egyptians in Macedonia and Kosovo and those of the ancient Egyptians. In his view this indeed may be the consequence of cultural continuity since cultural-religious forms,

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\(^1\) Although this type of anthropogenetic research seemed to me reminiscent of former Nazi methods, I discovered that it still has respectability among tsiganologists. The blood group distribution among Gypsies is stated to be markedly different from that of (other) Europeans (Fraser 1992:24-25).

\(^1\) Stojan Risteski too mentions the Egyptians’ devotion to St Naum, giving some details about their pilgrimage to the shrine of \textit{Sveti Naum} at Lake Ohrid (1991:165). He also tells the story of a rich Egyptian from Resen (Macedonia), who donated a belfry to the church of St Naum just after World War II (1991:167-168). In addition he gives a short description of the religious customs of the Egyptians: \textit{Tanasovden} (St Athanas Day) is celebrated at home (1991:192), while \textit{Gjurgjovden} (St George’s Day) is celebrated at Muslim shrines (1991:190). Thanks to Gordana Netkovska who translated these stories for me.
especially birth, marriage and death rituals, are extremely durable and stand the test of time the longest (Božović n.d.).

In short, these two Serbian scientists are willing to consider the Egyptian thesis seriously: for them it is not inconceivable that Alexander the Great had already brought Egyptians to the Balkans. In that case it is also possible that they settled in Greece, founded ‘Little Egypt’, and from there spread to other Balkan towns. It was only in later centuries that the first Gypsies arrived in Little Egypt, from where they continued to the north. As a result the Egyptians were erroneously identified with them (Damnjanović 1990).

Former Albanianization of the Egyptians: social status and ethnicity

Because the Egyptians were not officially recognised as an ethnic minority, most of them registered as Albanians during previous Yugoslav censuses (Ljubisavljević 1990:34). The reasons for this identification are clear. In the first place, their mother tongue is in most cases Albanian. In addition, the Egyptians are Muslims and hence share numerous customs with the Albanians. The Albanians, however, consider them to be ‘Albanian’ or Albanianized Gypsies because of their Gypsy-like (physical) characteristics (Damnjanović 1990:37). The head of the federal commission that organised the 1991 census also thinks that the Egyptians are Albanianized Gypsies (Der Spiegel, 15 October 1990).

For Kosovo, all data indicate that the Egyptians recruit their members mainly from the Ashkali (Albanian; Aškalije in Serbian), a term that most of these ‘Albanian’ Gypsies use for

15 Obviously, they did not make recourse to other possibilities, for instance registering as Jugosloven or as etničko neopredeljen, ethnically indefinite.

16 The proto-Egyptians whom I met in Gračanica also spoke Albanian among themselves. Nonetheless, not all Egyptians seem to be Albanophone. According to Rajko Djurić, there are also Turkish speaking Egyptians in Ohrid (personal communication). Lazović & Nikolić Pisarev (1990) write that some Egyptians speak Macedonian or Serbian. According to Victor Friedman, the Egyptians (Gjupeci) of Bitola speak Macedonian (personal communication).
themselves. The designation ‘Egyptians’ is new among them. When this process of Albanianization took place is unclear: it might be of a quite recent date (see Barjaktarović 1970:746), but according to most of my informants the Ashkali Albanianized during the late Ottoman period, working as peasants on the large estates (chiflik-s) of Albanian landowners. In general the position of these peasants was worse than that of others, and not much better than that of agricultural labourers (Jelavich 1983:60). During this period, these Gypsies adopted the Albanian language, converted to Islam, and adapted themselves to the strong patriarchal way of life of most Albanians. In Kosovo, this process was most profound in the south-western part of the province (best known by the Serbian name Metohija, or Rrafshi i Dukagjinit in Albanian), where most chiftlik-s existed. After the end of Ottoman domination, many of these Gypsy agricultural labourers settled in nearby towns. Nowadays, in and around the towns of Gjakova (Djakovica) and Peja (Peć), but also in some other towns in Kosovo, a fairly large number of Ashkali is found. They clearly differentiate themselves from Gypsies, and strictly adhere to Albanian customary law, particularly in family matters. Furthermore, they are strongly

17 Vukanović who has written an important book on the Gypsies in Yugoslavia (1983), does not write more than a few lines about these Ashkali. He states that they are nomadic Gypsies, of the Muslim faith, that they are by profession blacksmiths, kettle menders and tinsmiths, and that their mother tongue is the Romani language. They are affiliated to Albanian tribes, as Vukanović writes, and are in the process of transforming themselves into Albanians (1983:138). Not all of his qualifications seem to be correct, however. As far as I have experienced, Ashkali do not know Romani, or only inadequately. Albanian is their native language. Furthermore, they are sedentary, unlike nomadic Gypsies who are generally the least assimilated.

18 Petrović assumes that the use of Gypsies as a working force on Turkish estates started soon after the Ottoman conquest (1976:55-56). Nonetheless, generally the fate of Gypsies living under the Ottomans was better than in Western Europe (Fraser 1992:173-178). For the chiflik system, in particular for Kosovo, see Roux (1992:192-193).

19 According to Vukanović there are 63.000 Gypsies whose native language is Albanian (1983:134). Officially, the number of (declared) Romi with Albanian as their native language (according to the census of 1981) is much smaller, fewer than 7.000 (Petrović 1992:120).
endogamous and rarely marry other Gypsies. Because of their assimilated way of life Ashkali lay claim to a higher social status than ordinary Gypsies.

Although the phenomenon is primarily linked to the Ashkali, at least in Kosovo, it is likely that also other Gypsy groups are using the label. This may be the case among the Arlije, a general designation for sedentarized Muslim Gypsies. Culturally, the Ashkali and Arlije are closely related; the Ashkali might be seen as a subcategory of the Arlije, i.e. as ‘Albanian’ Arlije (Heinschink 1978:12). In Macedonia the phenomenon seems to be much more related to existing groups of ‘Egyptians’ as mentioned by Tatomir Vukanović (1983). Since Vukanović wrote his book on the Gypsies in Yugoslavia long before the rise of the current Egyptian movement, he deals exclusively with local groups of Edjup(c)i or ‘Egyptians’. In most cases, these groups seem to have been sedentary and urban for many generations, using this label to express superiority with respect to Gypsies. They claim to be from Egypt (Vukanović 1983:140). Also in nineteenth century Montenegro the word ‘Egyptian’ was used as a ‘euphemism’ for the pejorative term Ciganjin (Bogišić 1874:402); the same is the case in contemporary Albania (Cortiade 1991:3).

For the moment, we may conclude that the Yugoslav Egyptians want to distinguish themselves from Gypsies because of cultural and status differences. This particular way of marking themselves off socially and ethnically seems to have a long tradition in parts of (former) Yugoslavia and Albania. Although their background has not been clarified, it seems likely that

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Cortiade wrote a very informative article about Gypsies in Albania, published in Italian in 1992. Here, I use the original (unpublished) English manuscript (1991). According to him, the Evgjit or Jevg are not Gypsies; both terms “refer properly to a dark complexioned social group of unclear origin” (1991:3). They constitute a minor group of a few thousand people, living in Tirana and other cities of central Albania, and their native language is Albanian: “[M]any of them have reached great success especially in the arts, first of all in music and dancing, but also in some administrative jobs and even in the army, in spite of some prejudices related to their proverbial lack of courage” (1991:5). In the 1930s, Stuart Mann wrote: “They stoutly deny any connexion with the Roms, and to call them ‘Tsikán’ is the worst possible insult. Their traditions seem to point to an African origin. (...) One theory (I forget whose) is that the Jevgs are descendants of Egyptian slaves who escaped from Greece and fled to Albania. They are clean, honest, hard working, and fairly intelligent” (1933:2-3).
they adapted themselves to and consequently identified with dominant Turco-Albanian culture, especially in the towns. In Yugoslavia, during the censuses they mostly registered as Albanians. However, since 1990 some of them do not want to be Albanians anymore, but Egyptians. Why?

**Ethnic mimicry among Gypsies**

From the foregoing, one may conclude that the identification with Albanians was a freely made and ‘positive’ choice, at least in the post-war period. But the distinction between free and more imposed choices is often hard to make. At first sight, people appear to behave in a certain way voluntarily, but on closer inspection their conduct turns out to be affected by economic, social, political or other pressures. This is particularly the case among Gypsies, and no less among those who designate themselves as Egyptians. I will try to show that the Egyptians are affected by changing ethno-political conditions that explain why they were first ‘Albanians’ and now want to be ‘Egyptians’. I will concentrate mainly on the role of the Yugoslav census system, and its political implications. In my view, it is not accidental that the Egyptians appeared shortly before the census of 1991. First, however, I will analyse the widespread reluctance among Gypsies to declare themselves as Gypsies.

It is a common for them to declare themselves as non-Gypsies, especially during censuses, which makes it always very difficult to assess their exact number. This has been the case in the republics of (former) Yugoslavia as well. As the Serbian ethnologist Barjaktarović once slightly ironically remarked: “Today, in Yugoslavia, we have the opportunity to meet Rumanians, Albanians, Turks, Slovenes, Serbs, Macedonians etc., but who have nonetheless an outstanding Gypsy physiognomy” (1970:748). Since the World War Two, this has been reflected in the Yugoslav census results (before that, Gypsies were not registered). The official figures for Gypsies have always been much lower than the unofficial estimates of specialists. According to Vukanović’s calculations the number of Gypsies in (former) Yugoslavia exceeded 600,000, most of them living in Serbia and Macedonia (1983:134). In 1977, the Commission for Human Rights of the United Nations presented an even higher figure of almost 750,000 Gypsies (Mitrović
1990:19). Nevertheless, during the census of 1981, only 168,000 persons declared themselves as such (approximately twenty-five per cent of the total Gypsy population if the estimates are correct), other Gypsies being registered as Serb, Albanian, Macedonian or something else. In addition, the censuses have shown considerable fluctuations in the numbers of Gypsies. For instance, the census of 1961 showed a dramatic fall in numbers compared to 1953 (except for Macedonia), while in 1981 their number doubled compared to the results of ten years before.

The reasons for this ethnic ‘mimicry’ are of an equivocal nature. Inner motives as well as external pressures, ‘pull’ as well as ‘push’ factors, are in play. Some observers speak affirmatively of the ‘integration’ of Gypsies, emphasising positive identification, while many others argue that it is the result of ‘stigmatisation’ and ‘assimilation’, involving the social and economic pressures of the dominant society. It depends upon the observer’s personal assessment, influenced by ethnic affiliation or political orientation, whether one or the other factor is stressed. A good illustration of diverging opinions is an article by Popov (1992), in which he analyses the ‘Turcomania’ among Bulgarian Gypsies: they have increasingly identified with the Turkish minority and declare themselves en masse to be Turks. The former socialist governments explained this Turcization by pointing to ‘nationalist Turkish propaganda’ and ‘religious fanaticism’, while Popov’s emphasis is much more on voluntary identification with another (more prestigious) minority. He calls the declared Turkish identity of many Gypsies their ‘preferential ethnic conscience’. For Yugoslavia, Ruža Petrović makes a similar distinction between

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21 In Kosovo, 34 000 people declared themselves Gypsies, in Macedonia 43 000 (census 1981). It is likely that the real numbers are about four times higher.

22 With regard to Gypsies the official census results after World War Two show the following numbers: 72,736 (1948), 84,713 (1953), 31,073 (1961), 78,485 (1971) and 169,197 (1981) (Petrović 1992:116).

23 Following some authors from the former Yugoslavia, I use the term ‘mimicry’ to designate the widespread tendency among Gypsies to camouflage their ethnic background with a more respectable identity that offers them better prospects of survival. Yet it seems that they are never fully incorporated or ‘assimilated’ into the groups they identify with.
ethnic origin and ethnic orientation (*etničko poreklo* and *etnička opredeljenost*). Usually they coincide but they may differ considerably, as in the case of Gypsies. In the Yugoslav censuses only the latter has been registered, giving free play to alternative identities (1992:115). Petrović makes some interesting observations about the possible discrepancies between ethnic origin and ethnic orientation: they are most profound with respect to the census results and least with respect to official death rates. In most cases, people may change their identities during their lifetime, but they die as they were born, resulting in the irony that in the former Yugoslavia ‘Yugoslavs’ almost never died: most families were reluctant to classify a deceased relative as a Yugoslav and usually preferred to identify him according to his ethnic origin rather than his ethnic orientation (1992:122). With regard to Gypsies Petrović argues that those Gypsies who declare themselves differently belong to the more developed strata of Gypsy society (1992:127). Prokić (1992) and Mitrović (1990) come to similar conclusions. Prokić argues that ethnic mimicry is usually the result of upward social mobility (1992:104). Most Gypsies who have climbed the social ladder have very ambivalent feelings about their Gypsy background (1992:113). Mitrović concludes that ethnic mimicry is particularly prevalent among agriculturists and highly qualified workers, as well as among traditional urban sedentary families and the elderly. According to Mitrović, negative experiences as well as social and economic pressures from the non-Gypsy environment are responsible for these processes of ethnic mimicry (1990:21-22, 28-29).

Censuses and ethnic strife: large groups eat small ones

Censuses have always had important political backgrounds and implications. Benedict Anderson has demonstrated this for colonial South-east Asia, characterising the census as one of the institutions of colonial power, which “profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion” (1991:164). He points at the changeability and arbitrariness of identity categories: frequently, ethnic labels were not recognisable to the categorised and subcategorised themselves, but administrative penetration would make these categories increasingly real: “The
flow of subject populations through the mesh of differential schools, courts, clinics, police stations and immigration offices created ‘traffic-habits’ which in time gave real social life to the state’s earlier fantasies” (1991:169).

For Eastern Europe, the manipulation of censuses has been demonstrated by Liebich (1992). Apart from the widespread falsification of data or coercion of respondents the state controls census data by manipulating the classification system, by fragmenting, amalgamating, inventing or omitting groups. For instance Gypsies and Jews have been the main victims of the procedure of omission, while the invention of new ethnic designations was especially *en vogue* in Yugoslavia. After the establishment of the Macedonian nation, immediately after the World War Two, Tito’s regime invented the categories of ‘Yugoslavs’ and ‘Muslims’, “an act of pure creativity” in the view of Liebich (1992:34). Although it may be tempting to ridicule the creation of a Muslim nation, as Liebich does, recent history has shown that so-called ‘fictitious’ categories can become bitter reality on the battlefield.

Especially since the 1960s, when Yugoslavia pushed its multicultural policy furthest, census results have always been politically consequential. On the basis of the census results ‘ethnic keys’ were established, pertaining particularly to the regional and local levels of administration. By means of these ethnic quotas, resources like jobs, houses, (key) positions in administration and scholarships were proportionally divided among the different nations and nationalities. Although the system was designed to guarantee a fair distribution of resources and to reduce ethnic tensions, in many places it did not always produce the beneficial effects that were intended. In some poor, underdeveloped and ethnically mixed regions in the south it probably stimulated or at least kept ethnic rivalry alive. The ultimate consequence was the creation (or continuation) of a political arena in which ethnic affiliation was of primary importance. In my view, the mechanism was similar to what Anderson describes: when ethnic lines of division, fictitious or not, are of crucial importance in administration, they become increasingly ‘real’ because they are again and again reinforced.

But this was not the only deficiency of the Yugoslav system of ethnic quotas. In addition, it was insufficiently safeguarded against abuse and nepotism. Many persons in key positions
favoured their own ethnic group to the detriment of others. Ethnic rivalry was further enhanced by the fact that the ethno-political balance changed drastically when Yugoslavia took steps in the direction of political and economic decentralisation in the 1960s. In Kosovo, ethnic relations were turned upside down, causing frustrations among Serbs and presenting an opportunity for revanchism among Albanians (Popović et al. 1990). At the local level, one of the consequences of the ethnic quota system was a tendency among representatives of the dominant nations and nationalities to ‘assimilate’ or incorporate statistically some of the minor ethnic groups, especially those groups that share the same religion and cultural characteristics. In most cases, this was a ‘natural’ process in which coercion was largely unnecessary. Those who renounced their identity in censuses could count on certain social and economic favours or political protection. In this way a system of ethnic patronage developed, in which the main ethno-religious groups tried to absorb the small and powerless ones. This is illustrated by the well-known complaint of small ethnic and religious minorities: “Mi smo u sendviču izmedju dva naroda; i zna se, sendvič se pojede” (“We are being sandwiched between two nations; and it is well-known that a sandwich is always being swallowed”). Consequently, the official statistics do not accurately reflect the numbers of some of the smaller minorities, especially the most vulnerable ones. Certainly Gypsies have been ‘eaten up’ statistically. As their political rights have always been very limited, they were most susceptible to attempts at statistical assimilation.

From the middle of the 1960s until the middle of the 1980s (when Milošević started his campaign to abolish Kosovo’s autonomy), the Albanians were the most powerful ethnic bloc in Kosovo as well as in parts of western Macedonia. In Macedonia, however, Albanians never achieved the same level of political dominance as in the autonomous province of Kosovo. Their local numerical and economic predominance was counterbalanced by Macedonian political hegemony at the republican level. Nonetheless, it is very likely that Gypsies, through mechanisms of socio-economic and political control, were exposed to some kind of pressure to declare themselves Albanians. Serbs and Macedonians, as well as Gypsies themselves, have accused Albanians of urging them (and other Muslims) to do this during the censuses of 1971 and 1981, and some even claim that Albanians falsified the census results. Albanians are said to
have made an appeal to common religious identity: “We are all Muslims, so why not declare yourself as an Albanian?!”. With respect to Kosovo’s Gypsies, these accusations have been made by the Gypsy activist Slobodan Berberski, who gives much detailed evidence for these pressures, especially for the 1971 census (1984). In Macedonia, the authorities made similar allegations in 1990, accusing the main Albanian party (the Party for Democratic Prosperity in Macedonia) of manipulating Gypsies on a religious basis. Shortly afterwards, the Macedonian Romani community called on all Gypsies to stop declaring themselves as Albanians (Poulton 1991:90).

It is clear that in the conflict between Serbs and Albanians many Gypsies have sided with the Serbs, although they generally have much more in common with the Albanians, religiously as well as culturally. Since the middle of the 1980s, Gypsies have accused the Albanian majority in Kosovo of discriminatory attitudes, while Serbs, who are a small minority in Kosovo themselves, are praised for their ‘tolerance’. Although the latter might not be completely untrue, the identification with Serbs has, in my opinion, much more to do with changed political conditions than with the tolerance attributed to the Kosovo Serbs. Under the present conditions

24 In Romano allav, a local Gypsy journal in Prizren, such allegations were already being made in 1972, just after the census of 1971: “The census surely does not give a realistic number of Roms, because they did not declare themselves for what they are. The reason for this is very strong public pressure from other nations not to declare as Roms but as Albanians and Turks. Of course, this suits the others. The more Albanians there are, the better it is for them. Turks [who are quite numerous in Prizren, GD] also want to absorb Roms as much as possible, so their number will not become endangered. There was pressure from nationalist Serbs as well, who wanted the Roms to be as numerous as possible, so that other nations would be reduced in number. In that case, Serbs will play a much more significant role” (Menekshe et al. 1972:36).

25 Roux notes that Gypsies have had diverging positions in the recent past: some Gypsy groups have tended to be pro-Serb (for instance the Tharé-Goné, in spite of the fact that they are Muslims) whereas others (like the Gurbeti and the Ashkali) were pro-Albanian (Roux 1992:282). On the basis of this case study, it seems however that groups which were previously ‘pro-Albanian’ have shifted their loyalties. In the summer of 1998, the Kosovo Albanian press accused Gypsies of participating in the looting of Albanian houses by Serbian paramilitaries (see: Fatmir Podrimaj, “Romët u ndihmojnë paramilitarëve çëtnik në djejie e plaşkitjë”, in: Eurozëri, 14 August 1998, p.22).
Gypsies are unwilling to put their money on the Albanian horse, only on the Serbian one. After all, Kosovo is again strictly under Serbian rule, Albanian autonomy has been abolished, and the Albanian aspirations for a republic of Kosovo have been violently suppressed.

This dramatic change in the ethno-political balance of power also explains the appearance of the Egyptians, or perhaps more precisely, their emergence from identities that were previously only meaningful in local contexts. It is no longer advantageous to be Albanian: Serbs have taken over political hegemony and they are in control of all strategic institutions and key positions. Now they, and not the Albanians, are in the position to offer jobs or other ‘favours’. Since 1990, when more than a hundred thousand Albanians have been sacked, Serbs have employed Gypsies instead, some of them jobless for many years. Albanians have lost power, and therefore, are unable to secure the ‘ethnic loyalty’ of minor groups as they did before. Because the Egyptians do not want to be Albanians anymore and are still less inclined to become Gypsies, they have drawn on an old alternative identity: the Egyptian. This identity is ‘vacant’ again, now that most Gypsies cherish India as their homeland. Furthermore, in the long term, the Egyptian identity may be used to mobilise the political and economic support of Egypt. This outside support may result in an official status as a nationality, a status which Gypsies never realised.

The Serbs and the Macedonians have supported this shift in identity, obviously to weaken the Albanian numerical and political position as much as possible. It has been in their interest to detach Muslim Gypsies from the Albanian bloc, politically and culturally. And if some of them do not want to be Gypsies, why not let them be Egyptians? It is also indicative that the above mentioned Serbian scholars have re-labelled the Macedonian and Kosovan Egyptians as Christian Copts, which is one step further in the detachment of these Gypsies from the Muslim Albanian bloc. They are ‘Christianized’ and their ‘inauthentic’ Islamic identity is changed into an ‘original’ Christian one. It is questionable whether the Serbian and Macedonian authorities, in the end, are ready to grant substantial minority rights to the Egyptians, especially under the present conditions. Furthermore, in Macedonia, under the leadership of Kiro Gligorov, the position of Gypsies seems to have improved considerably (Poulton 1993; Barany 1995). This will probably prevent any further spreading of the phenomenon. In present-day Serbia the
conditions for some minorities are not favourable, to put it euphemistically. For most leaders of the (former) Yugoslav Gypsy community, the phenomenon is an extreme example of political manipulation and juggling with figures, "a pyramid of lies" as Rajko Djurić writes (1990). For them, the Egyptians are Gypsies who have surrendered to the promises and enticements offered to them by Serbian and Macedonian politicians (see also Krasnići 1991). In their opinion, the phenomenon is the outcome of the old practice of divide-and-rule of which Gypsies are again the victims.

Afterword

Ethnic identity is not something fixed, neither are nations and peoples isolated and self-confined entities. Since Fredrik Barth's (1969) pioneering work on ethnic groups and their boundaries, this insight has been widely accepted in the social sciences. Ethnic identities vary and change, are manipulated, imposed or in turn rejected, get slowly lost or are discarded, revived or (re)invented. Identities are, in the words of James Clifford, conjunctural and negotiated.

The Egyptians in Kosovo and Macedonia are a clear case in point. Although at first sight they seem to be a coincidental and arbitrary creation, their emergence is closely connected to the political turbulence that occurred in Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s: the advent of Serbian nationalism and the rise to power of Slobodan Milošević. Milošević reversed the 'subordinated' position of Serbia within the Yugoslav federation —eventually at the cost of Yugoslavia itself— by abolishing Kosovo's autonomy, as well as by installing his supporters in other federal units. For the Albanians in Kosovo this meant a dramatic change for the worse. I have argued that the emergence of the Egyptians as a national identity emanates from this drastic shift in the ethnic balance of power to the detriment of the Albanians. As a result, the Egyptians do not want to be Albanians anymore, and moreover, refuse to become Gypsies again. Their claims to an Egyptian

26 For Macedonia, Barany writes: "Most Macedonian Roma consider the 'Egipcanis's' claim to be as ridiculous as it sounds and no more than a desperate attempt to acquire support from abroad" (1995:528).
identity have been supported by others, notably by Serbian and Macedonian scientists and journalists, who regard the creation of an Egyptian identity as an instrument to affect the numerical predominance of the Albanians.

In more general terms, this case clearly shows that political change may lead to shifts in identity, in particular among groups that occupy a relatively weak position within the ethno-political arena. It also shows that the ‘authenticity’ and ‘credibility’ of claims of a new ethnic group trying to work out a distinct profile are not in the first place established by the group itself, but determined by other more powerful actors as well. Although I may have conveyed the impression that the ‘Egyptian’ advent was a deliberate act of political manipulation and far-fetched invention, closer inspection of the material suggests that this Egyptian identity has a basis in existing groups and identities. They were, however, purely local until recently: this notion of invention only applies to the wider ‘Yugo-Egyptian’ identity, and not to the ‘grassroots’ identities on which it is ultimately based. In order to explain these distinctions, the Egyptian leaders have recycled an old and obsolete theory about the origins of the Gypsies.

In my analysis, I have also tried to show that ethnic competition was inherent in the way the Yugoslav brand of communism tried to solve the national question. The question of whether this ethnic rivalry was the result of a deliberate communist policy of divide and rule, or perhaps the unintended outcome of a genuine attempt to overcome interethnic problems, remains still to be answered. In any case, instead of mitigating tensions, the census system and the related system of ethnic quotas have kept ethnic rivalry alive. Particularly in the 1980s, when the Yugoslav economy collapsed under the burden of enormous financial debts and rocketing inflation, these institutional arrangements contributed considerably to the rise of local tensions, at a time when nationalism became the dominant paradigm in the political centres. In my analysis of this process of ethnic polarisation, I have tried to highlight the position and fate of small minorities. While Albanians, Serbs and Macedonians are trying to establish political and ethnic hegemony over what they consider their territories, small minorities have been caught symbolically—in some other parts of former Yugoslavia even literally—between the lines of fire. With a large dose of inventiveness they try, as we have seen, to make the best of it.