

**Paper presented at the 2nd Conference of the *International Association for Southeastern Anthropology (In ASEA)*
Graz, February 20-23, 2003.**

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**From ‘Locality’ to ‘European Identity’:
Shifting Identities among the Pomak Minority in Greece**

Introduction

The argument presented here is based on data collected during fieldwork, which I conducted from January 2000 to July 2002 in the highlands of Xanthi (*Ξάνθη*), the so called Pomak area, located in Western Thrace (*Δυτική Θράκη*). The Pomak area of Xanthi^[1] or the ‘mountain’, as both Christians and Muslims commonly call it, includes 59 villages^[2] and ‘mahalas’^[3]. With a population^[4] of 15,824 people^[5], till the early ’90s it was socially and economically marginalized from the rest of the Prefecture of Xanthi. The area can still be regarded as a discrete unit with visible boundaries, which could serve to designate it as separate.

The Community of Thermes in the Pomak area of Xanthi (*Κοινότητα Θερμών*), which includes seven villages (Ano, Meses and Kato Thermes, Medousa, Kidari, Diasparto and Kotani) as well as a small Spa resort, Loutra, has been my fieldwork location. The distance of the first village (Ano Thermes) from the town of Xanthi is 46 km and of the last one (Medousa) 54 km. The population of the Community was 1,396 people according to the census of 1991. The estimated permanent residents though, were less than 1,200 people, and gradually decreasing year by year.

The Pomaks^[6] constitute the second most numerous Muslim group in Greece after the ethnic Turks and remained rather cut off from the rest of the population of the country until the early

'90s. Their practice of endogamy and lack of interest in trading and traveling contributed significantly to the creation of a bounded, isolated community. The creation of the Modern Greek nation-state did not mean the opening of a new era for the Pomaks. On the contrary, their location in one of the most strategically important areas of the country (near the borders with Bulgaria and close to Turkey), their Islamic religion, which in the administrators' minds identified them with the ethnic Turks and their language^[7], a Bulgarian idiom of the South Slav group of languages, contributed to a deterioration of their situation. Being generally unable to deal with the bureaucratic machinery of the state, they have used middlemen for their social and economic deals. This of course is not an unusual phenomenon in Greek society, although within the minority it might have some further significance, stressing even more the "we/they" dichotomy, which apparently exists anyway.

After the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and to the present the perception of the Pomaks by Greeks, Bulgarians and Turks was each time related to their respective nationalist claims in the area of Western Thrace. The official Greek policies right from the beginning of the construction of the Greek nation-state were not qualifying the Pomaks as Greeks because they did not share membership to the Greek Orthodox Church. During the inter-war period they were regarded as Turks. At that time the state was not at all interested in them, those who studied usually went to Turkish minority schools or the *Medrese*^[8] in Xanthi and Komotini and practically they were not distinguished from the ethnic Turks living in Western Thrace who also controlled all Islamic religious institutions. After the Second World War when Bulgarian troops occupied Western Thrace the Pomaks were subjected to Bulgarian ethnic engineering. In the Greek Civil War Bulgaria was for Greece the main threat and the 'Bulgarian-speaking' Pomaks were "regarded as the fifth column of Bulgaria and of Communism" especially since Bulgaria's involvement in the Civil War (Brunnbauer 2001:48). Since 1952 and the Cold War the Pomak areas were declared 'controlled areas' and by that time it was Bulgaria and not Turkey, which was also a NATO member that was considered as threat to Greece.

The Pomaks were not Bulgarian-oriented since after the Balkan Wars (1912-13) and the annexation of Thrace to Bulgaria (Clogg 1997:86, Svolopoulos 1992, Kitsikis 1998) both the Muslims as well as the Christians in Thrace suffered extreme persecution (Varvounis 1997) and they often expressed the desire for their area to be annexed to Greece (Papathanasi-Mousiopolou

1992). The Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos ordered the local authorities to show the maximum support to the Pomaks who were seeking refuge in the Greek part of Thrace.^[9] They did not trust Turkey either, because of the laicist character of the political changes of the Kemalist reforms.^[10] After 1931, the Turkish Consulate in Komotini organized the diffusion of the Kemalist reforms in the region of Western Thrace by using the teachers of the minority schools as agents for this operation. These activities took the form of organized ethnic engineering in both areas, with the aim of creating Turkish ethnic identity among the Pomaks.^[11] During the following years several Greek governments showed inefficiency and weakness in dealing with the issue of the Pomaks. The Turkish Consulate in Komotini took advantage of the feelings of dissatisfaction which injustice, prejudice and discrimination on the part of the Greek state over a long period had created for the Pomaks, and developed a well organized plan to offer them financial as well as political support in return for their ethnic identity (see also Liapis 1995). Several Muslim as well as Christian informants told me that Turkey has used many people in each Prefecture (Xanthi and Komotini) to carry out this project. One of my informants, who belongs to what I call the Pomak 'educational elite' of Western Thrace, tried to explain to me how Turkey organized ethnic engineering among the Pomaks especially during the last twenty-five years. This person, who claimed to be a Greek Pomak, stressed to me that:

“ [...] the Greek governments sold out the Pomaks to Turkey. When I was a child still living in the village we all knew that we were Pomaks. We had our culture, our festivities, our music. There was also a good Christian teacher living permanently with us in the village for over fifteen years and he taught all of us Greek. A Muslim MP candidate entered the coffee shop of our village once. Hearing us speaking in Greek he said in Turkish: 'I saw a minaret and I thought I came to a Turkish village but obviously I made a mistake'. Then I stood up and told him that 'this is a Pomak village, we are Greek Pomaks and there is no Turkish village around here'. In those elections he only got one vote in our village. But during the next elections, four years later, almost everybody voted for him. How did this happen? Now if you go to my village they all speak Turkish and claim to be Turks. Turkey has worked a lot up there. They chose the cleverest people in each Pomak village, they paid them to declare Turkish identity and convince the others to do the same. They have used any means to achieve their aims, from bribery to intimidation. They were promising people that they would grant their children scholarships for studies in Turkey. Many children, even after primary school, registered in religious educational institutions in Turkey. Some of them pursued University studies afterwards and on coming back to Greece, they became the links between the villages and the Turkish Consulate. They were something like the 'eyes' of Turkey in our villages. Since they were educated, people 'listened' to them. They also 'listened' to the *Imam*. In the villages after God, came the Imam. The Imams and the Hocas were

also involved in this plan. Over two decades, between the early '80s and late '90s they managed to 'Turkify' most of our villages. I go to my village now and get depressed. They have changed our culture, they even assume our local festivities (*πανηγύρια*), to be Turkish. I was offered a considerable monthly payment plus membership in the 'Advisory Committee of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace' (*Συμβουλευτική Επιτροπή Τουρκικής Μειονότητας Δυτικής Θράκης*) if I would publicly admitted that I was wrong to claim that there are Pomaks in Thrace and that all the Muslims in Thrace are Turks. I did not accept the offer. They went on insisting that I should stop talking and writing about Pomak culture and Pomak language. Even the Police sent some official to advise me so. Politicians from both sides were suggesting that I should stop talking about Pomaks. An official of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me during a conference: "We do not need more minorities. The Turkish one is enough". They even threatened my family. They want to make us disappear. I said publicly once: 'one day both Greeks and Turks will apologize for what they have done to the Pomaks'".

As I have already mentioned, until the early '90s a large part of Western Thrace, within which almost all of the Pomak villages lie, was a 'controlled area' due to reasons of "national security". People were restricted in their freedom of movement to 30 Km radius of their residence and in case they distanced further they were obliged to return to the area before sunset. Purchase of land was not allowed, construction and driving licenses were not issued.

Although these restrictions were gradually revoked during the '90s, they fueled the development of client relationships between Pomaks and influential Christians. A Christian politician who knows the Pomak area well and has also worked as a teacher in one of the Gymnasia in the Pomak area told me:

"It was a disgrace for a democratic country. The Pomaks were kept isolated in the 'mountain' they could not leave the area without reporting to the soldiers at the outpost on the main road and they should return before the sunset. They could not obtain driving licenses unless they bribed some official, they could not buy land or build houses. Sometimes they paid fines for extensions they illegally added to their houses. But they had no choice. There were no roads, schools or any kind of infrastructure in the area. The Christian officials and politicians were making money through relations of clientage that they developed with the Pomaks. Now that the situation has changed, they can invest their money in the area. In the past, they took all their money to Turkey. They bought houses and property there since they could not do it here. Now they sell their property in Turkey and buy here in Xanthi. They feel more confident in dealing with the civil services and in less than a decade they managed to improve their social and economic conditions. Among them though, there are many who do not like the positive changes. These are usually their authorities, who see that they lose control over the people as they get educated and develop. It was much easier to manipulate them when they were intimidated and uneducated. Their authorities, including mayors, presidents of communities and religious persons very often set

obstacles to development projects in the area. They want the people to be displeased with the state so that they can more easily ‘turn’ them to Turkey (*να τους στρέψουν στην Τουρκία*). But many among the Pomaks are fed up with these people and they wish to be able to live and work in equality and peace”

Identity formation and identity shift in Thermes

The case of the Pomaks of Western Thrace is of great interest in terms of identity formation and identity shift or change. Their Muslim religion, Slavic language, [\[12\]](#) their socio-economic marginalization over a long period of time, and the fact that ethnically they have been claimed by three different countries, have created a rather more situational, flexible ethnicity among them, adapted to a variety of inter-group interactions and corresponding to changes in their environment. As one of my male informants put it:

“In relation to our identity they confused us. Some say that we are Bulgarians, then the others come and say ‘you are Turks’ and the Greeks say ‘you are Greeks’. I believe that we are the only native people in the area, islamized during the Ottoman Empire. All of you are foreigners (*ζένοι*). We do not know what all of you, Greeks, Turks or Bulgarians who came to our area later on, say. We are only sure about one thing. That our fathers and grandfathers were from here”.

The label ‘Bulgarian’ here is used in reference to mother language, a confusion, which as Karakasidou observes among the people in Guvezna, is “attributable largely to the imposition of national labels on local patterns of speech and language” (1997:71). Very often the Pomaks in Thermes were telling me ‘we are locals that is all we know’. Declaring any other identity except from being ‘local’ (*ντόπιος*) would probably raise objections by some among them. So far, their ‘locality’ has been the only commonly accepted referent of the Pomak identity, including kin ties, language, religion and customs. Since it has not been directly connected with any ethnic attribute, it seemed to be the most practical way to avoid discussions on ethnic identification, which created much trouble for them in the past. At the time of my fieldwork, some Pomaks in Thermes carefully resisted, Greek, Turkish and Bulgarian national labels and started claiming European identity, which gave them the status and the credit of an EU citizenship, [\[13\]](#) which they did not need to defend or negotiate.

Some Pomaks declared that they were descendants of Alexander the Great. The students in the

Gymnasium^[14] of Thermes enjoyed narrating to their teachers the story about how Alexander the Great recruited the best among the Pomaks for his army and that they followed him on his expeditions.^[15] The primordial sentiments that bind the Pomaks with the legend of Alexander and the ancient Macedonian kingdom do not result from an “unbroken narrative” of the nation (Geertz 1973:341), nor is it “a constructed tradition that grew out of practical necessity and common interests” (Karakasidou 1997:74). Few among them, including some of the students of the Gymnasium, who seemed proud of identifying with such an important historical personality, thus, reinforcing their own Pomak identity, maintained this theory. On the other hand, others strongly objected to the above theory about the descent of the Pomaks. As one of my informants put it:

“We are Pomaks with Greek citizenship, Greek Pomaks. I do not believe that we are descendants of Alexander the Great. This would change the history and would make Alexander a Pomak. I do not think that the Greeks would like this. Among us there are Slavic people with Slavic characteristics and light complexion, like us, the Pomaks of Xanthi, and others with darker complexion who originate from the Agrians^[16], like the Pomaks of Komotini”.

Studies on ethnic identity change which combine primordialist and situationalist approaches argue that “the way members of an ethnic group conceive of their identity may change as the result of interactions between neighbouring ethnic groups, but that newly modified identities will remain anchored by a cultural core which is based on the members’ self-perception” (Gorenburg 1999:555). Individuals thus, may change their identities to correspond with various kinds of changes in their environment. Furthermore, state institutions and state policies for members of certain groups, may also lead to ethnic identity shift within these groups. This also applies to refugees who often face socio-economic problems similar to the minorities’ within the state. Hirschon observes that government policy played important role in the perpetuation of the refugees’ sense of ‘separate identity’ among the Asia Minor refugees. “Their grievances were ignored by successive governments and they failed to become a pressure group. [...] the mass of urban refugees lived in a state of long-term political marginality” (1989:43).

The Pomaks in Thermes are usually very cautious in expressing ethnic affiliations or identity in the presence of people not belonging to their community. During the last decade the Pomaks have

clearly started ‘negotiating’ their identity as a response to government policies that improved their socio-economic conditions, which among others included equality before the law, abolition of several restrictions of economic and political type and declassification of the Pomak area in Xanthi as a ‘restricted zone’. Nevertheless, there are still two kinds of ethnic identification. The private one, which is based on the members’ self-perception, linked to their own culture and referring to interactions within the group, and the public one, which refers to the identity used by them in interactions with outsiders ^[17]. Among the Pomaks in Thermes I observed that the public identity is multiple according to the person with whom they interact. Discussing with young Pomaks who are migrants in Germany, I realized, that they assume ‘Greek’ identification interacting with Germans, since Greece is a member of the EU and they feel secure and proud in claiming the European identity, but they might also assume Greek-Pomak or Turkish when interacting with Greeks or Turks. As one of my informants said:

“In Germany we enjoy some privileges since we hold European passports. Sometimes it is enough to show your passport and you are treated as a European. Even those who say that we, the Pomaks, are Turks, when they go to Germany or elsewhere in Europe they also say they are Greek”.

Identity shift in Thermes is linked with the status of the languages used in different contexts and the prestige the use of each one of these languages attributes to the speaker. The Pomak language does not enjoy the same status as Greek or Turkish. Pomak culture is not highly esteemed and it is only to be expected that some youngsters will be attracted to a more powerful or highly regarded culture. Since Turkish is a language they learn almost in parallel to Pomak, and it is also the means of their religious instruction, many of them, especially those who continue their studies in Turkey, shift identity. The same might happen to a small number of Pomaks who feel closer to the Greek culture. These are usually not among the very religious ones but persons who have socialized with Greeks for a long time because of work and immigration. Still though, they will never become particularly extrovert about their culture preferences. They will not express it openly in the community, unless they have decided to live permanently away from their village.

In Thermes, each village seems to be at a different stage of adaptation to the new conditions created by the elimination of restrictions and the subsequent economic and social growth. This depends on the influence which powerful individuals within the communities exercise over the people and the means they use to keep them under their control.

From 'Locality' to 'European identity'

It has already been stressed that long-term neglect, indifferent treatment and discrimination by the state accounted for the Pomaks' political disaffection. In this case, people's dissatisfaction has been used by Turkey to create an affiliation which eventually would allow an excuse for conditional political interference. At the time of my fieldwork many people in the Community still did not see their interests as associated with Greece, despite the fact that they lived, worked and raised their children in the country. Some among them seemed unwilling to accept that their political, social and economic exclusion had practically ceased and seemed reluctant to adjust to the changed conditions of life. Lack of trust in state politics as well as the ties of affiliation that they have developed with Turkey over a long period were hard to abandon. Most of them seemed extremely cautious in expressing any particular ethnic identification. Rather, they felt more comfortable in asserting their 'locality' and membership of a community, which was 'real'^[18] to them. Some others, especially those less affiliated to Turkey, claimed a European identity^[19] that stands juxtaposed to the non-European 'Other', and emphasized its supranational character (see Shore 1993:781). "Europe" as a newly constructed 'imagined' entity, similar to 'community' and 'nation',^[20] gives most people a psychological and emotional sense of security through belonging to a powerful unit which ensures their interests without counting on their differences. European institutional definitions nevertheless entail a degree of discrimination and cultural chauvinism (Shore 1993), which contribute to a growth of xenophobia and racism directed to the non-Europeans. Fellow Europeans seem ready to declare their belonging to this unit, which declares that it seeks "to establish between States the same rules and codes of behaviour that enabled primitive societies to become peaceful and civilized".^[21]

According to a 'federalist' model, the European Union requires the elimination of those barriers that constitute the nation-state at least wherever these impede progress towards full political and economic integration. A functionalist model meanwhile, views European integration "as a non-conflictual, segmentary-type of cohesion between complementary tiers of authority" (Shore 1993:787). 'European identity' which has been created by Commission bureaucrats with time and through policy initiatives has been presented as a fixed, 'natural' category. Among the Pomaks in

Thermes, this new ‘identity’ helps them to reconsider their position in society, escaping from ethnic categorizations of the past, which were responsible for many misfortunes they suffered over a long period of time. The issue of Pomak identity, which has been politicized and became the apple of discord for Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria, has created feelings of insecurity, fear and confusion among Pomaks, making them too weak to resist political pressure and vulnerable to threats coming usually either from the Turkish Consulate in Komotini [\[22\]](#) or the local authorities of the Christian majority. People now feel comfortable with declaring themselves to be ‘European’, a quality, which is given ‘a priori’ to all citizens of the European state-members without risking being ethnically labeled. European strategic measures to promote social and cultural cohesion through education, cultural exchanges, citizens rights, the abolition of internal barriers to employment and residence are all well accepted by the Pomaks who feel equal to the rest of the Europeans especially when they migrate as labourers to other European countries. One of my informants told me:

“For the Germans we are Europeans since we hold European passports. We are treated as equals and enjoy the same rights as home people”.

As I have already mentioned, many of my informants stressed the importance of being ‘European’ in relation to the social and economic prospects that this quality offers. I observed that educational programs and innovations applied to primary or secondary schools were more easily welcome when they were European projects, irrespective of their context. In the past years, every attempt on the part of the Greek Ministry of Education to change the smallest detail in relation to the curriculum and educational material used in minority primary schools was seen with suspicion and raised objections on the part of the Turkish minority in particular. At the time of my fieldwork, the locals seemed willing to accept more easily European rather than government policies in relation to education.

The local notables and their attitudes to schooling in the area

The Gymnasium in Thermes was not welcomed in the area by the local religious authorities, the Imams [\[23\]](#) and the Hocas, who tried to convince the communities that the Greek Government establishes secondary schools in order to interfere with the communities’ affairs and affect

children's faith (Islam) and language (Turkish!). They spread the idea among the people that the Greek state would attempt their 'Hellenization'^[24] through the schools and change their sense of identity strictly connected with their faith. Nevertheless, the nature of the Imams' and Hocas' influence on people differed from community to community according to the nature of these personalities and the degree to which they have been affiliated to Turkey, or committed to the Turkish Consulate of Komotini, the capital town of the neighbouring Prefecture of Rhodope. Some 'brave' informants told me that even from the beginning of the establishment of the Gymnasium in Thermes in 1984, the Imams launched a campaign among the locals to prevent them from sending the boys to school^[25]. Their basic argument was that in this school the Turkish language was not included in the Curriculum. As for the girls the basic argument was that at school they would be away from the surveillance of their family, in constant contact with boys, and thus their reputation would be at risk.

For many decades the Imams and the Hocas in the Pomak villages have been the educated elite who alongside their religious and educational duties were also exercising political power. The possession of knowledge offered them the ability to negotiate with the authorities and the bureaucracy when the rest of the villagers would not have felt comfortable in doing so. Besides, their role within the communities has been to preserve and disseminate the Islamic tradition. This educational elite has been in close contact with the Turkish Consulate of Komotini. Turkey has been using the Consulate to promote its propaganda among the Pomaks. The Imams and the Hocas in most of the communities have been the Consulate's people who would report on events happening among the community that would be of some political interest as well as work on building Turkish ethnic consciousness among the Pomaks.

When the Gymnasium was established in the area of Thermes, on the one hand, they felt that they would lose the power that they possessed as an educated elite if people started being educated and on the other hand, they feared the fact that they would lose control over those children who would choose to study in the Greek state schools. By learning the Greek language better and at the same time being educated according to the curriculum of a Greek school, they would obtain more knowledge of Greek culture and that would probably distance them from their own culture as well as the control of the community. Were people to have become more educated, this elite would have found them harder to control. My informants have referred to numerous cases of threats,

bribes, and systematic propaganda in the *'cami'* on Fridays against the Greek state and in favour of 'motherland Turkey', as well as marginalization of those who would send their children to state Greek schools.

According to Cummins (1999:261), critical literacy threatens well-established systems of privileges by diminishing the power of indoctrination and misinformation, and enables people to 'read between lines', which means to examine whose interests are served through particular forms of communication. For Moffett, literacy has always been seen as 'dangerous' since it overcomes, in a natural way, boundaries of time, space and culture through familiarity with the experiences of others (1989:85). School, as the institution through which literacy is achieved, according to the ideology of the nation-state, aims at perpetuating a social discourse that would enforce national, cultural and religious feelings. School at the same time teaches language and language is a tool for exercising power. Among the Pomaks till very recently, the only agents of power were the Imams and the Hocas, because they possessed 'knowledge', and at the same time they were the religious mediators. People respected, obeyed and feared them since they possessed this power.

Some of my informants observed that things are currently changing and as more young people get educated, the Imams and the Hocas gradually lose power, at least among the youngsters. Also, inconsistency between what they advise people to do with their children and what they themselves do, makes many lose faith in them. In one particular case, an Imam who consistently advised people not to send their children to the Greek state school of Thermes, sent his own children and grandchildren to a Greek state school in Xanthi. This was criticised by those who were discouraged by him from doing the same when their own children reached the age of going to the Gymnasium. "He wants us to remain uneducated" one of the girls who studied at the Gymnasium told me and she continued:

"But why us and not his own children as well? There is something wrong here. My father was very upset because he listened to him and did not let me go to the Gymnasium soon after I finished *'dimotiko'* (primary school). But when he learned that his own grandchildren go to a Gymnasium in Xanthi, he got angry. The following year he let me go".

The opinion of the grandfather and the Imam often holds more weight than the parents' in matters related to the future of the children. Especially when these have to do with dealing with the Greek state in any form. Nevertheless, there are families which break this tradition under the influence

of modernization which gradually reaches these isolated communities. One of my principal informants, an educated young Pomak, was telling me that until the older generation dies, there is no hope for a radical change of attitude towards the education of the girls.

The office of the Imam is hereditary, as well as his power. In the case of the Mayor of the area as well as the Presidents of the Communities things change since they are elected by the people. Their attitude towards the Greek state Gymnasia in the area is generally not supportive. They set obstacles in the way of the regular running of these schools by any means, including failing to allocate state funds to the schools, or even, cutting off the water supply, as was the case of the biggest (in terms of student population) school of the area [\[26\]](#). They told me that they were politically bound to their electors not to ‘recognize’ (*ν’αναγνωρίζουν*) the Greek state Gymnasia in the area, unless they included Turkish language classes in their curriculum. To their voters they say that Turkish is the language spoken in ‘Motherland’ Turkey as well as the official language of their religion and that the state tries to break the unity of the Muslim minority by distinguishing between Pomaks and ethnic Turks.

To an external observer the demand for adding the tuition of the Turkish language to the Curriculum of the state Gymnasia, seems strange. Why should a Pomak Mayor or a Pomak President of a Community in the Pomak area of Xanthi ask the Greek state to introduce Turkish language classes in the curriculum of the Gymnasia? The Mayor told me that since the Pomaks are taught Turkish in the minority primary schools and since all primary schools in the area are minority ones there should also be minority Gymnasia, since the *Medrese* in Ehinós, the only minority institution of secondary education in the area, is not sufficient. The question is why should the Pomaks learn Turkish in the first place. At this point, I would like to comment on the fact that the Mayor has three children and all of them studied at Greek state Gymnasia in the town of Xanthi and not in the private Minority Gymnasium of Xanthi or the *Medrese* in Ehinós. One of them, at the time of my fieldwork was already pursuing University studies at the Polytechnic of Thessaloniki (the biggest city in Northern Greece). I asked him why his own children studied in state Gymnasia in Xanthi though he did not ‘recognize’ the Greek state Gymnasia within his municipality. He told me that he did not trust the quality of knowledge at the Minority Gymnasium and also that this school is so crowded that the educational standards drop dramatically.

It is obvious that the local elite educates its children at Greek state schools because these youths are meant to be the future politicians and religious practitioners of their communities. Good knowledge of the Greek language is necessary for social mobility within Greece. On the other hand, the elite's insistence on not accepting the state Gymnasia in the area and on introducing Turkish language teaching to the Pomak students, seems inconsistent with what they choose for their own children. If we consider Pierce's proposal that investing by learning a language is an investment in someone's social identity, an identity which changes through time (cited by Cummins 1999:69), then we can suggest that those who insist on teaching Turkish to the Pomaks, to the detriment of their mother tongue, as well as to the official language of the country, aim at some kind of investment in the students' identity. For those nevertheless who possess power and want to preserve it and pass it to their descendents, this investment rather takes the form of a tool used for maintaining this power.

Identity formation among students

During my fieldwork, part of my work included research in the state school of secondary education in Thermes. I administered a questionnaire to students into how they constructed their identity. The questionnaire was based on the idea of generating words, trying to extract from each respondent a narrative that would combine personal experiences and features of their identity system. The students emphasized their 'trilingualism' (Pomak, Greek and Turkish) and Muslim religion in their effort to describe themselves. Language and religion as well as a sense of locality have been the main components of their identity. Three out of twenty-three said that they are Pomaks and one described himself as a 'Muslim Greek Pomak Turk'. The *cami*, the primary school, the river, the forest and the police station were in order of precedence the most important sites in their villages and among the most important individuals were their father, the Imam, the teachers, their grandmother and mother, the Hoca and the President of the Community. Beside

language, religion and locality, the authority of the father within the family and the spiritual authority of the Imam were prevalent in the students' identity system according to their responses to the questionnaire.

Pomak children were not sustaining or expressing their identity in opposition to the Greek culture, but they seemed to lose confidence when they had to 'cross' culture and study at an institution, such as the state Gymnasium, where their own culture was not accommodated. Their sense of Pomak identity inhibited them from considering that they could succeed in graduating and they viewed the prospect of pursuing studies at the Lyceum as almost impossible. Thus, generally they did not feel motivated to put much effort into their studies but rather viewed schooling as an opportunity for socializing. The most advantaged and ambitious among them did not experience their identity as a restraining factor for their progress at school and the enhancement of their future job chances, although they felt that they should put more effort into attaining good knowledge of the Greek language. I observed that no more than three out of twenty-three (23) students in the Gymnasium of Thermes, had no reservation about declaring their Pomak origin and sometimes even criticized openly and humorously the irrationality which characterized national and local politics towards the Pomaks. The fact that they socialized in a school environment exclusively with Pomak students has been very important to the reinforcement of their sense of Pomak identity, which, unlike the situation among the students of migrant origin in the United States described by Portes and MacLeod, was not perceived as undesirable (1996).

Looking at the possibility that the students of the Gymnasium in Thermes might assume more than one ethnic identity in order to optimize personal opportunity, I made use of literature on situational ethnic selection. ^[27] Generally, I did not observe alternating ethnic identification (Becker 1990, Nagata 1974) among these Pomak students. They did not seem to present situational ethnicity, at the school and community environment, not with regard to the cultural/symbolic realm (behaviour, values, styles of interaction and material culture), nor the structural realm (group boundaries, conflict, interaction). They were all conscious of their Pomak origin, their Pomak mother tongue, which they used both in the community as well as at the school with each other and they dressed the same at school as in the village. The student composition (all being Pomak) as well as the location of the school at a close distance from their communities have been important factors for the development of such an attitude. On the contrary, Pomak students in

the schools of the town of Xanthi usually picked up attitudes and behaviour similar to those of the other children at their age, regardless of ethnicity. This has not been a conscious ethnic selection, but rather a situational one. In literature this operative principle, called ‘situational selection’, describes alternation models as a switching between different structures, fields or systems, where an individual selects behaviour patterns appropriate to the sets of relations in which a situation involves him/her at a given moment (Epstein 1978, Mayer 1962).

Alternation models of situational selection could also be observed among the students in Thermes, mostly in the cultural realm, rather than the structural one, through material culture. For example, during school excursions, or educational programmes where the Pomak students would have to work together with students from schools from other parts of the country, some of the girls would choose western dress in order not to differ from the other girls. Those who dared do so were criticized by the community as well as their fellow students both male and female. These girls were telling me that when they socialized with students from other schools they did not feel comfortable in their traditional clothes and they did not enjoy being seen as different and exotic, but as equal. What they wanted was not to manifest difference but rather to reinforce communication and socialization by making a cultural selection, which they felt would bring them closer to the non-Pomak students. Thus, the situational adoption of their dressing style was a move to minimize the cultural distance expressed in a symbolic way.

“Last year we went with our long skirts and kerchiefs but this year the three of us decided to wear trousers and go ‘uncovered’. We wanted to be like the other girls from Athens. When some old people from the village saw us getting on the bus that morning they told us: ‘if you go dressed like this do not come back to the village’. They do not mind their own business. Since our parents let us what is their problem?”

Things might be somehow different for those who have migrated to other parts of Greece or abroad for work or studies. When these people spoke to me about their life away from the community, they put emphasis on the fact that they were different from the other villagers who lived permanently in the area, because they have ‘broadened their minds’.

“I lived 12 years in Athens. My children were born there not here in the village. Going away educates you. You see things in a different way. But when you come back you return to the old ways. Villagers do not understand modern ideas, and if they notice that you have changed you are in trouble.”

In conclusion, I believe that the identity system and cultural frame of reference for the Pomaks are different from the majority but not oppositional. Although the education provided at school does not represent their culture but the dominant culture, and that education has started becoming priority for the Thermiots very recently, every year the number of Pomak students who enroll in the public Gymnasium in Thermes as well as the number of the students enrolling in the other Gymnasia of the mountainous area of Xanthi increases steadily. They seem to separate those aspects of the school culture that facilitate academic success and try to conform to them in ways considered essential for school success within Christian Greek culture. At the same time they appear to resist giving up their own culture, and ‘survive’ quite successfully in both cultural contexts. They do not equate schooling with acculturation or assimilation, but rather perceive it as an investment in obtaining credentials for employment. Pomak children do not equate behaving in line with school norms with giving up their own culture and identity. On the contrary, these remain very powerful and well rooted in their lives. Unlike conservative villagers who seem to see the external values as ‘opposed’, they learn to move back and forth between two different cultures, two different realms and realities which are represented by the school, on one hand, and their home and community, on the other, but which are not necessarily oppositional.

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[1] This area includes villages with exclusively Pomak population. There are also other villages in the Prefecture of Xanthi, not on the mountainous zone, with considerable Pomak population.

[2] See also Theoharidis 1995.

[3] ‘*Mahala*’ is a Turkish word of Arabic origin meaning ‘neighbourhood’. The word is extensively used in Thrace as well as in many parts in Western Macedonia. In Xanthi, the word is used to describe a group of houses smaller than a village. My informants used either Pomak, Turkish or Greek words to express an idea. In the text I use the words they used providing a translation in English. Shifting language code is a very common phenomenon among multilingual people such as Pomaks.

[4] National Statistical Service of Greece: 2001 Census.

[5] See Greek Government’s project “‘*Ioannis Kapodistrias*’ for the reconstruction of Local Authorities”. Local Association of Municipalities and Communities of the Prefecture of Xanthi. Office for Development and Programming. May 1998.

[6] For several Greek scholars they are indigenous Thracians who were assimilated by the Turkish populations due to their proximity. About the Greek theories on the history of the Pomaks see Hidiroglou 1989; Milonas 1990; Varvounis 1997; Magriotis 1990; Theoharidis 1995; Troumbeta 2001; Brunnbauer 2001. For the Turks the Pomaks are descendants of a Turkish tribe, the Kumans, who moved to the Balkan area in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. The Bulgarian theories maintain that the Pomaks are Bulgarians who had been islamized between the 16th and the 19th centuries. A number of Bulgarian scholars have dealt with this issue (see Krasteva-Blagoeva 2001) some holding the theory that the Pomaks were forcefully islamized and some others that they voluntarily converted to Islam for economic reasons (see Zhelyzkova 1990 referred by Krasteva-Blagoeva 2001). Their conversion to Islam attributed negative connotations to the name ‘Pomak’, which according to Bulgarian Christians derives from the ‘*povlyakal se*’ (dragging), because they dragged after another faith. The Pomaks themselves though claim that ‘Pomak’ is someone who has been ‘*pomachen*’ (tortured) to change his faith. For an extended literature review on the Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish theories on the origins of the Pomaks and their name see Troumbeta 2001; Brunnbauer 2001.

[7] The Pomak does not constitute a ‘language’ but a ‘dialect’ and thus, in the text the word ‘language’ is not used in the linguistic meaning of it to designate a separate language but rather in the sense of a ‘language code’ used by this particular group of people. There have been two major efforts to record the Pomak language. One was made by the 4th Army Corps (*Δ’ Σώμα Στρατού*), based in Xanthi. With the support of the Commander of the Corps, three Pomak soldiers, graduates of the Special Academy of Thessaloniki (*ΕΠΙΑΘ*), together with a small team of Christian Philologists (graduates of Greek Studies), also soldiers in the same Corps, undertook this task which included two dictionaries (Pomak-Greek and Greek-Pomak), edited in 1996 as well as a grammar book, edited one year later (Karahoca 1996). They used the Greek alphabet. Soon after this first publication, a Greek entrepreneur called Emfietjoglou, president of a large construction company which employed many Pomaks, especially during the construction of the big dam of Thisavros in the Prefecture of Xanthi, funded the edition of another dictionary and grammar by using the same team of Pomak teachers. Another effort to record the Pomak language was made by a Christian teacher, Theoharidis (1996a,b,c), who spent twelve years as a teacher at minority primary schools in the Pomak area of Xanthi (1964-1975). He has been criticized by educated Pomaks for not having acquired sufficient language competence for such an enterprise and also for having registered 26,000 words in his dictionary including also those taken from Greek and having been slightly altered. At the time that these lines are written, Ritvan

Karahoca, one of the Pomak teachers who worked for the dictionary published by the 4th Army Corps in Xanthi, is working on an electronic Pomak dictionary which includes about 11.500 words (see: www.PomLex.com).

[8] Religious Muslim Institution.

[9] In December 1919 the Muslim MPs in Bulgaria sent a letter to the Greek government asking for protection against Bulgaria. On the 16th of March 1920 Venizelos sent a telegraph from Paris asking from the Greek authorities to protect and assist the Pomaks. See Papathanasi-Mousiopolou 1992 :19-28, Divani 1995:169-71.

[10] On the difference between the traditional religious character of the ‘Old Muslims’ (*Παλαιομουσουλμάνοι*) of Western Thrace and the ‘Young Turks’ (*Νεότουρκοι*) see Tsioumis 1995, Divani 1995.

[11] See Divani 1995:190-1, Andreades 1956: 4-8, Panagiotidis 1995.

[12] Some Pomaks do not want their language to be called ‘Bulgarian’ and they react to that. The President of the Centre for Pomak Research (*Κέντρο Πομακικών Ερευνών*) and editor of the Pomak newspaper ‘*Zagalisa*’, Omer Hamdi, sent to the Contact Bulletin (February 1999. Vol. 15 (2)) of the *European Bureau For Lesser Used Languages* a letter complaining about the classification of the Pomak language as ‘Bulgarian’ by stating the following: “... I am taking the liberty of noting something about our language on the European map of languages. I saw that our language is regarded as ‘Bulgarian’. There is no doubt about the strong relationship between the Pomaki and the Bulgarian language (and all Slavic languages). But at the same time on the map the Slavic idiom in Greek Macedonia is named ‘Macedonian’ although it is much closer to the Bulgarian language. I think that this is a point, which could be seen again. Omer Hamdi, ‘Zagalisa’ Director, Komotini 21-1-98.”

[13] For an extensive criticism on how Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia nation-states “emphasized ethnicity and religion rather than citizenship as the major criteria for establishing a person’s membership in the national “imagined community”” see Roudometof Victor 1996.

[14] In Greece secondary education is six years. The first three years (Gymnasium) form part of the obligatory education. The last three years constitute the Lyceum. In Thermes there is only one Gymnasium.

[15] Liapis observes that Alexander the Great who started his expeditions in 334 A.D., passing from Thrace recruited Thracian tribes. The most important among them were the Agrianes (1983:3). In the same reference there is brief historical overview of the area of Thrace and the people who inhabited it (1-44). Also Papathanasi-Mousiopolou citing Foteas suggests that the Agrianes were traced back to Alexander the Great (1991).

[16] According to Theoharidis, during the Byzantine times the area including the mountains of Rhodope was named Achrido (*Αχριδώ*) and the people Achrianes (*Αχριάνες*) (1995:49). See also Papathanasi-Mousiopolou 1991.

[17] On private and public identity see also Gorenburg 1999.

[18] ‘Real’ community, in the sense of close social interaction of its members “invested with all the sentiments attached to kinship, friendship, neighbouring, rivalry, familiarity, jealousy, as they inform the social process of everyday life” (Cohen 1985:13).

[19] Till 1992 the term ‘European’ had not been officially defined. As one EC report states: “[...the term European] combines geographical, historical and cultural elements which all contribute to the European identity. The shared experience of proximity, ideas, values and historical interaction cannot be condensed into a simple formula, and is subject to review by each succeeding generation. The Commission believes that it is neither possible nor opportune to establish now the frontiers of the European Union, whose contours will be shared over many years to come” (Commission 1992: paragraph 7).

[20] See also Anderson 1983, Cohen 1985, and Gellner 1964.

[21] Contained in the Commission's mass-circulation information booklet on *A citizen's Europe*. Cited by Shore 1993:793.

[22] Komotini is the capital town of the Prefecture of Rhodope in Western Thrace.

[23] *The Imam* is a religious leader.

[24] 'Hellenization' (*Εξελληνισμός*), means someone's conversion to Greek Orthodox Christianity.

[25] Girls were sent to the school much later in 1999.

[26] See newspapers '*Μακεδονία*', 1-3-2000 and '*Βραδυνή*', 25-2-2000.

[27] See Mayer 1962 on alternation models or switching behaviour of Africans in towns, and Nagata 1974 on social interaction and situational ethnic selection among the Malay.