

January
2025

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*Beyond Irregular Pathways:
Cultural Frameworks, Solidarity Networks, and Agency
in Albanian Migration to the UK*

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Funded by the European Union (ERC, SOLROUTES, 101053836). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Beyond Irregular Pathways: Cultural Frameworks, Solidarity Networks, and Agency in Albanian Migration to the UK

Abstract

This ethnographic study examines Albanian irregular migration to the United Kingdom through a socio-cultural lens, challenging dominant narratives that frame irregular migration primarily within narratives of criminality and trafficking. Drawing on fieldwork with Albanian migrants, the research explores how traditional cultural constructs—*Kurbet* (temporary labour migration), *Kanun* (customary law), and *Besa* (moral code of trust)—shape contemporary mobility practices and solidarity networks. Through digital ethnographic methodologies, including participatory storytelling workshops and co-created podcasts, the study foregrounds migrants' voices and agency while documenting the complex interplay between cultural continuity and adaptation in contemporary migration contexts. The findings highlight how these cultural frameworks simultaneously provide moral grounding and undergo a transformation in response to modern migration challenges, particularly the commodification of migration routes. By examining the multifaceted experiences of Albanian migrants navigating perilous journeys to the UK, this research contributes to broader scholarly debates on the intersections between tradition, agency, and structural constraints in migration studies, offering nuanced insights into how cultural traditions inform contemporary practices of mobility and solidarity.

Introduction

Albania constitutes a paradigmatic case of contemporary mobility, characterised by a complex interplay of historical continuities and contemporary socio-economic pressures (Carletto et al., 2006). Historically, migration has been integral to Albanian society, extending back to the Ottoman period. Over the past three decades, economic hardship, political instability, and constrained domestic opportunities have compelled many Albanians to seek livelihoods abroad. The United Kingdom has recently emerged as a significant destination, particularly for irregular migration—a phenomenon driven by perceived economic opportunities and facilitated by extensive transnational networks.

Since 1990, Albania has experienced substantial emigration, with over 1.6 million citizens departing—a striking figure for a nation whose current population is fewer than 3 million.¹ The 2010s marked a notable intensification of migration intentions, with recent surveys indicating that approximately 14% of Albania's population considering emigration, frequently through irregular means (King & Gëdeshi, 2022; Balla, 2023). This contemporary wave is primarily motivated by economic aspirations intertwined with idealised notions of prosperity, stability, and employment opportunities available in Western Europe and North America (King, 2005).

This research explores the multifaceted experiences of Albanian migrants travelling to the UK and critically problematises dominant narratives on Albanian irregular migration. This research deliberately departs from conventional scholarly representations that predominantly frame Albanian irregular migration within narratives of criminality, human smuggling, or trafficking.

¹ Surveys from the Albanian Institute of Statistics and the International Organization for Migration show that since 1990, around 1,684,135 individuals have left Albania, with only 350,000 departing during the 2010s (Tirana Times, 2021).

Instead, it adopts a reflexive stance that foregrounds socio-cultural dimensions often overlooked in mainstream analyses. The study critically examines how traditional cultural frameworks—specifically *Kurbet* (temporary labour migration), *Kanun* (customary law), and *Besa* (moral code of trust)—shape migrants' decision-making processes and community dynamics. By employing digital ethnographic methodologies—including participatory storytelling, podcasts, and viral artistic works—the research foregrounds migrants' voices and agency, thus bridging socio-cultural traditions with contemporary experiences of mobility and solidarity.

This approach contributes to broader scholarly debates on the intersections between tradition and adaptation within migration studies. It challenges dominant narratives that frequently reduce Albanian irregular migration exclusively to issues of smuggling or trafficking linked to criminal networks. Instead, this research emphasises migrants' agency and resilience within broader structural constraints, offering nuanced insights into how cultural traditions continue to inform contemporary practices of mobility and solidarity.

Cultural Dimensions of Albanian Migration

Migration is deeply embedded in the human experience, encompassing socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions. This study emphasises the interconnectedness of historical traditions with contemporary migration realities. The Albanian case exemplifies how historical mobility patterns intersect with contemporary challenges shaped by globalisation, restrictive migration policies, and socio-political dynamics. This research report questions Albanian migration as purely an economic phenomenon; instead, the research emphasises migration as a profoundly cultural and historical process shaped by collective memory, shared values, and evolving social practices. The conceptual tools of this study focus on three key historical-cultural constructs: *Kurbet* (temporary labour migration) as a framework for mobility, *Kanun* (customary law), and *Besa* (a moral code of trust) as social regulators, which provide a lens to understand the cultural dimensions of Albanian migration. These concepts serve as interpretive frameworks and active elements in shaping the behaviour and decision-making of migrants. These conceptual frameworks reflect a collective memory that shapes both individual aspirations and the organisation of migration networks. *Kurbet*, a traditional practice of temporary labour migration rooted in the Ottoman period, embodies the cultural narrative of resilience and sacrifice for familial benefit (King, 2005; Bon, 2017). It is visually codified in artistic-produced artefacts like Shazart's works published in TikTok (Figure 1). The juxtaposed paintings (1991 boat exodus vs 2022 UK-bound dingy) historicise the recurring Albanian mobility (as one TikTok comments: "1991 copy paste 2025"), employing nearly identical colour palettes and composition to frame modern migration as cyclical trauma.



Figure 1 Albania in 1991 and Albania now! Two oil paintings posted on TikTok by the Albanian young artist Shazart 2024.12.18.

Although signifying male-dominated, temporary labour migration, it transcends its historical roots to encompass modern practices of economic mobility. It represents the hope of financial improvement and the emotional cost of separation from family and homeland. The narratives associated with *Kurbet*, including themes of endurance, sacrifice, and pride, offer insights into the cultural psyche that underpins migration decisions. Modern adaptations of *Kurbet* reflect the increasing precariousness of migration, as migrants navigate exploitative systems while upholding the aspiration to return home as successful providers. This tradition intertwines with sociocultural concepts such as *Kanun*, the customary Albanian law that governs social norms and conflict resolution, and *Besa*, the moral code of trust and honour. **Kanun**, the traditional Albanian code of conduct, provides a social framework for navigating relationships and obligations (Voell, 2003). Historically, its emphasis on honour, loyalty, and collective responsibility regulated trust within migration networks. However, the commodification of migration routes has strained the relevance of *Kanun*, mainly as smuggling networks prioritise profit over cultural obligations. Despite this, its enduring influence persists in the moral underpinnings of diaspora communities, where informal codes of conduct continue to guide interactions and support mechanisms. **Besa**, the uniquely Albanian moral code of trust and honour remains a powerful cultural construct in migration contexts (Voell, 2003). As a verbal commitment that signifies unbreakable trust, *Besa* continues to shape familial and community relationships among migrants. Even in the face of

commercialised migration systems, *Besa* serves as a cultural counterweight to exploitation, fostering solidarity and resilience. For example, migrants often rely on familial promises of financial support or safe passage, rooted in *Besa*'s moral authority.

These conceptual tools are not static; they evolve in response to contemporary migration challenges. By examining *Kurbet*, *Kanun*, and *Besa* as living traditions, this study captures the dynamic interplay between cultural continuity and adaptation, providing a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dimensions of Albanian migration. These conceptual frameworks, viewed through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, function as structuring structures, influencing not only individual decisions but also the organisation of migration networks.

In migration studies, solidarity networks are increasingly recognised as dynamic systems that adapt to the socio-political landscape of migration. The concept of solidarity in migration has evolved with changing contexts. Traditionally rooted in kinship and village ties, solidarity now includes transnational networks that adapt to modern challenges. The Albanian diaspora exemplifies how these networks maintain bonds across borders while fostering new forms of community support in host countries. For Albanian migrants, these networks extend beyond kinship ties, incorporating broader transnational connections shaped by economic necessity and shared vulnerability. Migration experiences are mediated by intersecting factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, and age. This study acknowledges how these dimensions interact with cultural practices and economic constraints, shaping the vulnerabilities and agency of migrants. For instance, male-centred traditions like *Kurbet* historically normalised men's absence for reasons of labour migration, yet contemporary patterns show increasing participation of women in migration, challenging traditional gender roles. These approaches allow a nuanced exploration of how cultural values, social systems, and individual agency converge in the Albanian migration experience.

Methodological Approach: Participatory Digital Ethnography

This study employs a methodology that combines traditional qualitative research methods with contemporary digital tools to capture the multifaceted experiences of Albanian migrants. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the socio-cultural dimensions of migration while leveraging innovative platforms to document and analyse narratives.

The data collection process involved multiple methods to ensure depth and diversity. Oral histories and semi-structured interviews were conducted with Albanian migrants who have travelled to the UK irregularly and were willing to share their experiences remotely and in person, providing rich, personal insights into their experiences. These interviews explored key themes such as migration routes, challenges during transit, and the role of cultural values like *Kanun* and *Besa*. Narrative workshops and storytelling sessions were organised to foster a participatory research environment where migrants contributed to the co-creation of podcasts and radio programs. These platforms enabled participants to articulate their stories in their own words, emphasising their agency and perspective. Additionally, visual documentation, including photographs, videos, and social media content, was used to capture the lived realities of

migration. These visuals complement verbal narratives, offering a more holistic understanding of the migration experience.

A combination of thematic analysis and narrative analysis was employed. Thematic analysis revealed recurring patterns and key issues across the data, such as the commodification of migration routes and the erosion of traditional trust systems. Additionally, it highlighted the extension of support networks beyond the immediate family, emphasising the broader community's role in sustaining migrants through their journeys. Narrative analysis delved deeper into how participants framed their experiences, particularly about cultural constructs like *Kurbet* and *Besa*. Digital tools (WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok) have also enabled extended online group discussions and interactions within Albanian diaspora communities. This methodological framework ensures a balance between rigour and creativity, capturing the complexity of migration experiences while prioritising participants' voices. Integrating digital and participatory artistic elements enriches the data and aligns with SOLROUTES's commitment to ethical and inclusive research practices.

The epistemological stance of this research is rooted in constructivism, which emphasises the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants. This perspective acknowledges that migration narratives are not fixed realities but are shaped by the lived experiences and socio-cultural contexts of migrants. By considering participants as active agents rather than passive informants, the study foregrounds their voices, allowing their perspectives to guide the research process. Constructivism aligns with the study's focus on cultural constructs such as *Kurbet*, *Kanun*, and *Besa*, recognising these as dynamic frameworks interpreted and reimaged by individuals in response to their circumstances.

The researcher's positionality as an Albanian, plays a significant role in shaping the study's approach, offering opportunities and challenges. Sharing a linguistic and cultural background with participants facilitated trust and rapport, allowing more profound engagement with their stories. This cultural affinity enabled the researcher to capture nuances that might be overlooked by an outsider, particularly in interpreting the layered meanings of traditions like *Besa* and the emotional weight of migration. However, this insider perspective also required reflexivity to mitigate potential biases, such as romanticising solidarity networks or cultural values. The researcher maintained a reflective stance throughout the study, interrogating their assumptions and ensuring participants' voices were prioritised over preconceived notions. The role of cultural insiders demanded a careful balance between empathetic storytelling and critical analysis. By actively engaging with these dualities, the study aimed to produce a nuanced account that respects participants' agency while critically examining the structural forces shaping their realities. Through its constructivist epistemology and reflexive approach to positionality, the study upholds an ethical commitment to amplifying the voices of Albanian migrants while critically interrogating the political and socio-cultural dimensions of migration. This balance ensures that the research remains authentic to participants' experiences and rigorous in its analytical contributions.

Migration Routes and Strategies: Agency Within Constraints

The migration routes from Albania to the UK have emerged lately.² It reflects a complex interplay of resilience, risk, and resourcefulness, highlighting the harrowing and multifaceted journeys migrants undertake to reach their destinations. Migrants adopt diverse strategies based on resources, networks, and intermediaries. Their narratives highlight three (interconnected) routes by trucks, dinghies, or even aeroplanes, emphasising the complexity and resilience migrants exhibit.



Route 1 is, as of the majority illegal immigrants, by truck

Route 2 is by dinghy from France, which has been used more recently

Route 3 is by plane

How do they find contacts and get connected?

with non-original passports like Italian and Greek, by booking two tickets at the same time, combining the UK schedule with another European country

from what I've heard, most have departed from Italy in this way

How is the journey, the countries of departure, their transit and their final destination?

Apart from the route by truck that you described, there are many border crossings such as Albania-Montenegro-Bosnia-Croatia-Slovenia-Austria-Germany, and then they cross to France, where is the underwater tunnel with England.

The agreement is with intermediaries.

When the client passes safely, then they make the money transfer (this depends on whether the money is given in Albania or England).

Figure 2 Excerpt from a conversation with an Albanian youngster narrating the experiences of his friends travelling to the UK

Overland Journeys: Hidden in Trucks

Overland routes represent the most viable option for many, albeit fraught with physical and logistical challenges. Migrants often hide in trucks or train carriages, enduring extreme weather and prolonged immobility while avoiding detection.³ This route frequently involves crossing multiple borders, with migrants relying on intermediaries to navigate checkpoints and border

² The United Kingdom has emerged as a prominent destination, with around 12,300 Albanians (constituting 28% of small-boat arrivals) attempting irregular entry in 2022—a phenomenon that simultaneously reveals both the desperation of potential migrants and the complex geopolitical negotiations of contemporary mobility (Migration Observatory 2022).

³ Albanian citizens can enter EU countries without a visa for short stays, typically up to 90 days within a 180-day period¹. This visa-free access is for tourism, business, or family visits, but not for work or long-term stays.

patrols. The journey extends across Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Germany, culminating in France before entering the UK via the Channel. Overland journeys highlight the importance of timing and coordination, as a single misstep can lead to detention or deportation. Migrants often hide in truck cabins or undercarriages, enduring extreme weather and long durations without food or water. Migrants endure extreme conditions while attempting to evade border controls. A.'s interview describes these routes in vivid detail:

Those travelling by truck use a land route passing through several countries: Albania-Montenegro-Bosnia-Croatia-Slovenia-Austria-Germany, eventually reaching France. From there, they cross into the UK via the underwater Channel Tunnel. The journey often involves hiding under the truck cabins, in direct contact with the asphalt, for 2-3 days under extreme weather conditions, both in winter and summer.



Figure 3: A selfie taken during the journey of a youngster hidden in a truck

Migrants must navigate the logistics of border checkpoints and often rely on intermediaries to coordinate timing and ensure safe passage. A. recounts how smugglers carefully plan truck schedules and load spaces to avoid detection.

For Glauk and Lumjan, who travelled to the UK some years ago, the truck journey was a physical and psychological ordeal. He described hiding in the driver's sleeping cabin or, in some cases, cutting open the truck roof, crawling in, and stitching it back up to remain concealed:

We carried sacks of coffee because the smell masked human scents from the police dogs at border crossings. While in the cabin, I could hear the officers inspecting the truck just a few feet away. The tension was unbearable”.

This method's success heavily depends on timing, coordination, and luck, as illustrated by Glauk's eventual arrival in Bristol, where his uncle paid the smugglers' fee of £4,500 upon his safe arrival.

Sea Crossings: Dinghies on Treacherous Waters

Sea crossings, mainly using inflatable dinghies to traverse the English Channel from France (also Belgium), have gained prominence but pose severe risks and are one of the riskiest migration methods. Overcrowded dinghies often carry vulnerable individuals, including infants, in harsh weather and dangerous conditions. Arber shared stories of migrants enduring overcrowded boats, harsh weather, and life-threatening conditions:

Camps near the coast were overcrowded, with people from various nationalities, including newborns and children as young as six months. When it was finally time to board the dinghy, people faced cold nights on the water. The boats were flimsy and unsuitable for the rough sea.

The dinghy crossings exemplify both human desperation and courage. Those who survived often shared stories of solidarity, like forming human chains to distribute blankets and food among children and the elderly during the long wait before embarking.

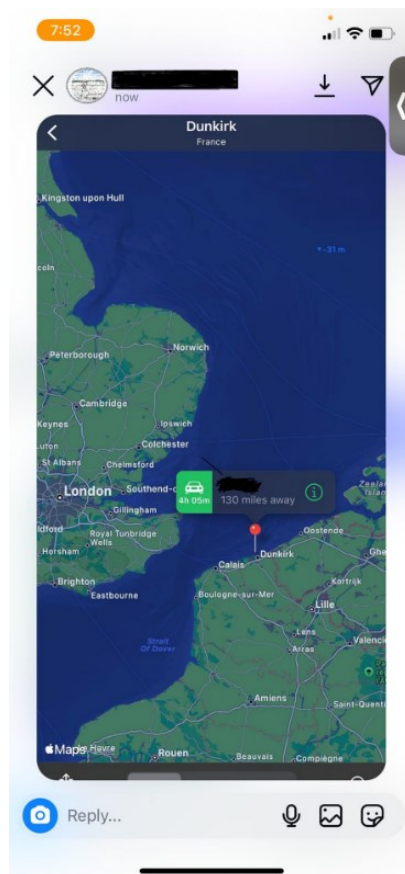


Figure 4: Photo location of the journey to the UK sent by a migrant to his friend

Air Travel with Forged Documents

For those with greater financial resources, air travel using falsified documents offers a potentially safer yet precarious option. Some migrants use falsified Italian or Greek passports to bypass border scrutiny. Several participants detailed the intricacies of arranging flights through third countries to avoid detection. However, this method requires substantial financial resources and

careful coordination. Arber explains how migrants use forged passports—Italian or Greek—and strategically plan their flights:

Migrants book two tickets simultaneously, coordinating flights from one European country to the UK via a third destination. This requires intricate planning and substantial payments to intermediaries who provide fake documents.

Despite the lower physical risks compared to truck or sea journeys, the reliance on forged passports exposes migrants to legal repercussions if caught. The success of this method depends on the intermediaries facilitating the process.

Combined Strategies and Unanticipated Detours

Many migrants adopt a combination of strategies as routes and plans shift in response to unforeseen obstacles. Dasar, an 18-year-old migrant, described an improvisational journey where he initially intended to travel by bus but ended up hiding beneath a train carriage to board a ferry. He planned to travel by bus from Albania to Bilbao and then to the UK. However, police interventions disrupted his route:

I was caught twice within an hour. With no German documents to prove my identity, I claimed to be German and evaded deportation temporarily... I had to climb under a train carriage to board the ferry to the UK. The risk was immense—the heavy steel wheels could crush me if I lost my grip during the 3-5 minutes it took to secure myself beneath the train.

Not all encounters during transit were adversarial. Dasar's journey underscores the improvisational nature of many migration attempts. He recalls a moment of unexpected kindness during his perilous journey:

While trying to board the ferry, I met a civilian guard who initially stopped me. But when I explained my situation, he let me pass, saying he understood my need to provide for my family. I will never forget his compassion in such a dark time... Later, when I reached the UK, I tried to find him to thank him with £2,000 as a token of gratitude, but I never saw him again.

His story reflects the adaptability required in irregular migration, where resourcefulness often determines success. Together, these routes underscore migration's physical and psychological toll while highlighting the ingenuity and determination of those seeking a better future.

Cultural Dynamics in Migration Contexts

Kurbet: The Weight of Absence

Kurbet, an etymologically Turkish-Arabic term for "travel-for-work," (*gurbet*) represents a deeply embedded cultural pattern of temporary, male-labour migration in Albanian and broader Balkan societies dating back to the Ottoman period (Bon, 2017). The concept of *kurbet* transcends mere geographical movement, embodying a complex socio-cultural phenomenon characterised by predominantly male-centred migration patterns that normalise men's absence within the

community while maintaining strong familial ties to the homeland, and operating within a unique framework of temporary absence (typically some years) that preserves robust psychological and social connections to the place of origin despite physical distance (Hristov, 2015). The term encapsulates not only the act of leaving but also the emotional burden associated with separation from home and family, a sentiment echoed in Albanian folk songs that lament the pain of migration (Papailias, 2003).

The cultural memory surrounding *kurbet* reflects a duality; it is viewed both as a necessary means for economic advancement and as a source of profound loss. This ambivalence is crucial for understanding how migration is woven into the fabric of Albanian identity and collective memory. As noted by Bon (2016), *kurbet* carries connotations of alienation and longing, which persist in contemporary narratives about migration.

Moreover, *kurbet* has been instrumental in constructing social networks that facilitate continued migration patterns. The concept is embedded in local folklore and oral histories, which recount journeys taken by ancestors and their impacts on community dynamics (Bon, 2008). These narratives not only preserve cultural heritage but also serve as guides for contemporary migrants navigating similar pathways.

In contrast to *kurbet*, *mërgim* is less frequently used in everyday discourse and carries different connotations. While *mërgim* broadly refers to migration, it lacks the historical depth and emotional resonance associated with *kurbet*. The predominance of terms like *emigrant* or *refugjat* reflects a shift towards narratives shaped by 20th-century European experiences of displacement and citizenship (Papailias, 2003). This linguistic distinction highlights how contemporary migration is often framed within broader geopolitical contexts rather than localised traditions.

The globalisation of labour markets has transformed traditional patterns of *kurbet* into more complex forms of mobility. Hristov (2015) discusses how modern migration must be understood within the framework of EU enlargement and increased labour opportunities across Europe. This evolution raises critical questions about whether traditional practices are being adapted or replaced by new forms of migration that prioritise economic gain over cultural ties. Despite these changes, the enduring legacy of *kurbet* remains evident in how communities respond to contemporary migration challenges. The emotional weight carried by this term continues to influence migrant identities and familial relationships, suggesting that while patterns may evolve, the fundamental human experiences associated with migration persist.

Albanian migration is deeply intertwined with cultural traditions and values, particularly the frameworks of *Kanun* (customary law) and *Besa* (a moral code of trust). These cultural constructs shape how migrants navigate their journeys and form relationships, even as they evolve or erode under the pressures of modern migration dynamics.

***Kanun*: A Framework for Social Order**

The *Kanun*, historically a comprehensive set of unwritten rules governing Albanian society, offers insights into the social order and mutual obligations within migration networks. Traditionally, the

Kanun emphasized trust, loyalty, and collective responsibility, with agreements often secured through personal bonds rather than formal contracts. However, as migration has become increasingly commodified, these traditional norms are under strain. Arber, a participant, lamented this shift:

The breaking of the *Kanun* is evident. In the past, agreements were based on trust without intermediaries. Today, people rely on middlemen, paying large sums to smugglers to navigate migration routes. If the agreement fails, trust is lost, and the *Kanun*'s principles are further undermined.

This erosion of *Kanun*'s principles reflects the broader challenges of navigating anonymous and transactional smuggling networks, where economic pressures often supersede cultural values.

***Besa*: A Symbol of Trust and Solidarity**

Despite weakening some aspects of the *Kanun*, *Besa*, the sacred promise or word of honour, continues to play a vital role in Albanian migration. *Besa* represents trust, loyalty, and the sanctity of one's word, serving as a moral compass for many migrants. Glauk shared a story of his uncle's unwavering commitment to *Besa*, ensuring that smugglers were only paid upon Glauk's safe arrival in the UK:

The deal was simple: no payment until I arrived. My uncle's pledge to honour this agreement was the only thing that gave me confidence during the journey. Without that trust, I don't think I would have made it.

This highlights how *Besa* remains a powerful force within familial and close-knit networks, even as broader societal contexts erode its influence.

Migration also necessitates the adaptation of these cultural values to new environments and challenges. I. recounted how her husband helped a family cross the border, driven by a sense of shared struggle and duty:

How could I turn my back on them? We know what it's like to be in their shoes.

This act of solidarity demonstrates how traditional values like *Besa* are reinterpreted in modern contexts, fostering mutual support among migrants and diaspora communities.

At the same time, the commodification of migration and the rise of "professionalized" smuggling networks challenge these cultural frameworks. As Arber observed, trust and solidarity often give way to transactional relationships:

Today, trust is not enough. Money dictates the terms, and intermediaries are needed to ensure agreements are upheld. This reliance on transactional relationships weakens the *Kanun* and *Besa*, as people no longer feel bound by cultural obligations. Smugglers are not bound by *Besa* or the *Kanun*. Their only loyalty is to profit.

This shift underscores the tension between tradition and modernity, where migrants must balance their cultural heritage with the realities of navigating a commercialised and often exploitative migration system.

Despite these challenges, the enduring presence of *Kanun* and *Besa* in migration narratives reflects their deep cultural resonance. While these values are tested and transformed, they continue to provide a sense of identity and moral grounding for Albanian migrants. As migration evolves, so does the expression of these traditions, revealing a dynamic interplay between cultural continuity and adaptation.

Solidarity Networks: Forms and Functions

Solidarity emerges as a cornerstone of Albanian migration experiences, providing crucial support in the face of physical, emotional, and logistical challenges. This solidarity manifests in multiple forms, ranging from familial and diaspora networks to acts of cross-cultural compassion and organised community efforts. Together, these forms of support highlight the resilience and interconnectedness of migrant communities while offering critical insights into the socio-cultural dimensions of migration.

Diaspora networks often act as lifelines for new arrivals, offering practical assistance such as housing, employment opportunities, and guidance on navigating unfamiliar environments. These networks are built on shared cultural values and mutual trust. Fatlum, emphasised the importance of family connections in easing his transition:

Without my cousin's help, I would have been lost. He provided not only a roof over my head but also the confidence to find my footing in a new country.

Similarly, Flamur, upon arriving in London, relied on an extended family network that had already established itself in the UK. These personal bonds exemplify how Albanian migrants mobilise existing relationships to build stability in host countries.

Solidarity extends beyond family ties to encompass collective assistance during transit. Migrants often form impromptu support systems, sharing resources and offering protection in precarious situations. Arben described a moment of solidarity in a crowded migrant camp near the French coast:

We didn't know each other, but we shared food and blankets with families who had young children. It wasn't about nationality or language—it was about surviving together.

These acts of compassion highlight the shared struggle that binds migrants, even across cultural and national divides. Cross-community solidarity also plays a significant role, with Albanians often aiding non-Albanian migrants in times of need. Such interactions underscore the universality of the migrant experience and the ability of shared adversity to foster bonds across cultural boundaries. At times, solidarity involves personal risk, as migrants place others' needs above their own safety. I. shared her husband's story of helping a vulnerable family cross the border:

He knew the risks but said he couldn't leave them behind, especially the mother with her children. It was a decision based on humanity, not logic.

These selfless acts reveal the moral imperatives that drive solidarity, even when it conflicts with self-preservation.

Moreover, platform-specific gestures supplement traditional solidarity through emoji clusters, hashtags and memetic minimalism comments on digital platforms. These “algorithmic” solidarity practices are activated by migrants' plight and transform personal suffering into collective claims-making, functioning as “digital solidarity” through viral repetition. Solidarity becomes a survival strategy and a source of hope for Albanian migrants. It sustains them through the challenges of transit and settlement, fostering resilience and a sense of belonging in uncertain environments. By understanding and amplifying these acts of solidarity, this research sheds light on the collective strength of migrant communities and their capacity to navigate even the most precarious circumstances.

Generative Narrative Workshop: Co-creating Migration Stories

The Generative Narrative Workshop (GNW) framework represents a significant methodological innovation in migration research, enabling collaborative authorship where participants contribute their stories to create a shared research object that combines personal, cultural, and collective memory. This approach aligns with participatory research principles where research is done collaboratively with individuals whose lived experiences and actions are the subject of study, as active partners who share power and influence over research processes and outcomes.

The two podcasts—“Journeys of Hope” (*Udhëtime Shprese*) and “Albanian Solidarity in Migration Journeys” (*Solidariteti Shqiptar në Udhëtimet e Migracionit*)—serve as platforms for sharing migration stories while connecting individual experiences to broader cultural and societal structures. These podcasts function as ethnographic documentation that captures the lived realities of Albanian migrants through their own voices and perspectives. As one participant reflected:

Sharing my story through the podcast allowed me to connect my personal journey with those of others. It wasn't just about telling what happened to me, but about understanding how my experience fits into a larger pattern of Albanian migration.

The podcasts incorporate traditional cultural frameworks like *Kurbet*, *Kanun*, and *Besa*, examining how these concepts shape migration experiences and solidarity networks. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions of migration while providing participants with a platform to articulate their experiences in ways that resonate with their cultural heritage.



Figure 5: Poster of the Podcasts *Journeys of Hope & Albanian Solidarity in Migration Journeys*

The radio novel format, "Journeys of *Kurbet*," represents another innovative aspect of the GNW, blending storytelling with cultural elements such as music and artistic narration to create and document collective narratives. This format reimagines journeys and connections to solidarity practices through a creative lens that preserves anonymity while capturing shared experiences. Rather than individual stories, they try to portray a more collective shared memory.

This approach acknowledges the sensitive nature of irregular migration stories while still honouring the experiences and perspectives of participants



Figure 6: *Journeys of Hope: Exploring Migration and Solidarity Networks* [Link](#)



Figure 7: Albanian Solidarity in Migration Journeys: Narratives of a Living Heritage. [Link](#)

Digital platforms serve as spaces for counter-narratives that challenge conventional representations of mobility, borders, and solidarity. By reproducing the lived experiences of Albanian migrants, these platforms contest dominant narratives that often reduce migration to issues of security, criminality, or victimhood. Instead, they foreground migrants' agency, resilience, and cultural frameworks, offering alternative perspectives that humanise migration experiences.

The GNW approach extends beyond academic research to engage with broader communities through collaboration with community-driven programs like Radio Rina. This partnership expands the reach and impact of the workshops, fostering dialogue about migration experiences within Albanian diaspora communities and beyond. By aligning with local cultural initiatives, the GNW creates spaces for collective reflection and knowledge sharing that transcend traditional academic boundaries.

The participatory nature of the GNW represents a significant departure from conventional research methodologies that often position migrants as passive subjects rather than active knowledge producers. By engaging migrants as co-creators of narratives, the GNW acknowledges their expertise and agency, challenging power imbalances inherent in traditional research approaches. This methodological innovation not only enriches the data but also aligns with ethical commitments to inclusive and empowering research practices.

Chapter 1: Leaving Tropojë

Ermir sat on the worn wooden steps of his family home, his gaze fixed on the distant mountains of Tropojë. The air carried a familiar scent of earth and autumn leaves, a scent that seemed to whisper, "You belong here." But Ermir knew the truth—there was no future in this small northern town, no future for his dreams.

It was 2017, the year he had grown tired of fighting against a system rigged to favor the powerful. After securing a job at the town hall, his hopes of joining the state administration were dashed when politics shut the doors on him. His name remained on an endless waiting list while his political beliefs wielded against him like a weapon. He felt the frustration of his years of schooling, which now seemed worthless. The bitter taste of rejection lingered as he packed his bag, a single suitcase carrying the weight of his aspirations.

"I'm leaving for London," he told his mother, who stood silent, her hands trembling over a pot of lentil soup. "I have no choice."

"At least wait for spring, my son," she pleaded. "Winter is cruel, and so are the seas." But Ermir couldn't wait. His cousin in the UK had secured the contact of a smuggler. "The man promises safe passage," his cousin assured him over the crackling phone line. The falsehood seemed so convincing that even Ermir decided to believe it.

Chapter 2: The Tunnel

Arbëri did press himself tightly underneath the cold belly of the wain, his breath clouding the frigid night air. In the cavernous darkness, he hearkened to the rumble of the engine and the muted voices of the border patrol, which grew ever more distant. The journey from Albania had been a mosaic of dread and resolve: a stolen passport, forged Italian documents, and endless hours spent in the suffocating confines of a wain.

"Move not, nor utter a sound," the driver had hissed before shoving him into the compartment. For two days, Arbëri lay on a sheet of cardboard, the noise of stones grinding beneath the turning wheels a constant reminder of how near lay freedom—or disaster.

Suddenly, the wain halted, and his heart began to beat more swiftly. He heard dogs barking, and boots crunching upon gravel, drawing ever closer. He clutched tightly the sachets of coffee he had secreted with him—the sole defense against the scent-detecting dogs. For a moment, his thoughts did wander to his village in Kukës and the sisters who had bade him farewell with ceaseless prayers.

After what seemed an eternity, the wain began to roar again, and Arbëri released a breath he had not realized he was holding. The tunnel was now behind him. England awaited.

Chapter 3: An Air Mattress

Fatlumi gazed at the small café where he had taken his first job in London, a place that now symbolized his sacrifices and humility. His job was to serve coffee and clean tables—a stark contrast to the confident young man who had once dreamed that England would bring him dignity and success.

The café had also become his refuge. For nearly a week, he had slept on a row of chairs pushed together after the last customer had left. One night, a friend brought him an air mattress, a blanket, and some clean clothes. Fatlumi felt tears sting his eyes as he accepted the gifts. "You've saved me, brother," he whispered, though his gratitude was tinged with shame.

In the morning, he deflated the mattress and tucked it away behind the counter. By night, he inflated it again, each pump of air into the mattress seemed to inflate a flicker of hope that tomorrow might bring something better.

Chapter 4: The Weed House

"I'm never going back to that life," Afrim said, his voice heavy with conviction. His hands shook as he recounted the months he had spent tending to cannabis plants in a derelict house on the outskirts of Manchester.

It had been his second attempt to reach England. This time, he'd used a more dangerous route: hiding beneath the wheels of a train until he could board a ship, his back pressed so close to the tracks that he felt the metal's vibration and heat sear through his body. When he finally made it, the promises of work and stability vanished, replaced by the glaring lights and suffocating smell of cannabis.

The work was relentless, the conditions brutal. Electricity buzzed from makeshift wiring, lights flickered, and the pungent smell of the plants clung to his skin. The shadow of guilt and the threat of deportation hung around his neck like a noose, tightening with each passing day.

One night, he escaped. He ran through the rain-slicked streets of a city he barely knew, clutching nothing but the tattered jacket and his fear on his back. "Never again," he muttered to himself as he boarded a bus to a new city, hoping to find the freedom that seemed ever more elusive.

Chapter 5: Kurbeti: The Weight of Absence

Kurbeti—a word Teuta had heard since childhood—was always mentioned with a sense of respect and despair. It meant leaving home to work abroad, often for years, hoping to return richer and more respected. But for those who lived it, exile was like a shadow, a reminder of the pain felt in empty rooms and silent family dinners.

Teuta remembered her grandfather speaking of exile when he was younger, about her father and uncles who had left for America, returning only with stories. "They sent money, but they also brought silence," her grandfather had said, looking at the fields he had once hoped to see flourish.

Now, as she stood in a small apartment in East London, sharing the space with another Albanian girl, she felt the weight of this word. The absence was not just physical; it was emotional. Her mother's voice trembled on the phone whenever she asked, "When will you come back?" "I don't know," she replied with a heavy heart. In exile, there was no certainty—only hope that one day she might return not just as a daughter, but as a worthy support for her family's sacrifices.

Note: The English translation of the Radio Novel: Journeys of *Kurbet*. Please note that the names used here are not real, and the stories are more artistic and include elements from different narratives of many interlocutors. Rather than individual stories, they try to portray a more collective shared memory.

Discussions and Reflections: Synthesising Findings and Future Directions

The findings of this study reveal a multifaceted narrative of Albanian migration to the UK, shaped by a dynamic interplay between tradition and adaptation, solidarity and commodification, resilience and vulnerability. This section synthesises these findings to explore their broader implications for migration studies, cultural continuity, and policy interventions.

Interplay of Tradition and Adaptation

Cultural frameworks such as *Kanun*, *Besa*, and *Kurbet* remain deeply ingrained in the collective identity of Albanian migrants, guiding their decisions and interactions. However, these traditions are not static; they evolve in response to the challenges of modern migration. For instance, while *Besa* continues to underpin trust within familial and close-knit networks, its influence diminishes in the context of “professionalised” smuggling operations. Similarly, *Kurbet*, traditionally a practice rooted in pride and perseverance, is now reimagined as a narrative of economic survival in increasingly precarious conditions. These shifts do not signify a loss of tradition but rather its resilience. Migrants reinterpret cultural values to navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining their core essence. This evolution underscores how tradition serves as both a stabilising force and an adaptive mechanism within migration contexts.

Solidarity as a Response to Vulnerability

Solidarity emerges as a critical coping mechanism for Albanian migrants, providing a buffer against migration's physical, psychological, and social hardships. The support systems formed within diaspora communities and among migrants in transit highlight the strength of shared cultural values and experiences. Acts of altruism, such as sharing resources in migrant camps or assisting vulnerable families across borders, reflect the enduring moral imperatives of *Besa* and *Kanun*'s emphasis on mutual responsibility.

Commodification and the Erosion of Trust

The commodification of migration routes has disrupted traditional notions of trust and reciprocity. Smugglers and intermediaries, driven primarily by profit, often exploit migrants' desperation, undermining cultural norms that once governed such interactions. This shift highlights the broader implications of neoliberal migration policies, which prioritise border security over human dignity, pushing migrants into increasingly precarious and dehumanising conditions. The erosion of trust in these contexts raises critical questions about the role of culture in mitigating exploitation and whether alternative support systems can restore a sense of accountability and fairness.

This study explores the intricate dynamics of Albanian migration to the UK, emphasising the interplay between cultural traditions, modern migration challenges, and the crucial role of solidarity. Through an ethnographic approach that integrates interviews, participatory narratives, and digital tools, the research highlights the resilience, adaptability, and vulnerabilities of Albanian migrants as they navigate complex and often perilous journeys.

The findings underscore the enduring influence of cultural constructs such as *Kanun*, *Besa*, and *Kurbet*, which provide moral and social frameworks for navigating migration. While these traditions adapt to the realities of modern mobility, they continue to offer a sense of identity and community, even as they are tested by the commodification of migration routes and the erosion of trust. This duality—between tradition and modernity—illuminates the resilience of Albanian migrants and the broader implications of cultural continuity in the context of global migration.

Solidarity emerges as a critical element in sustaining migrants through their journeys and in building resilience within diaspora communities. Whether through familial networks, acts of altruism in transit, or institutional support from NGOs, solidarity reflects the collective strength of migrant communities and their capacity to overcome adversity. However, the study also highlights the challenges of fostering cohesion amid diverse migration experiences and the tension between altruism and self-preservation.

The research also brings attention to the limitations of current migration policies, which often exacerbate migrants' vulnerabilities by prioritising border security over human dignity. Addressing these issues requires policies that recognise the socio-cultural dimensions of migration, create legal pathways for mobility, and support integration in host countries. Engaging with diaspora networks and leveraging cultural frameworks such as *Besa* could enhance the effectiveness of such policies, fostering trust and reducing exploitation.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of migration research by centering on the voices and experiences of migrants and examining the intersections of tradition, solidarity, and adaptation. It calls for further exploration of how cultural frameworks shape migration trajectories and how these insights can inform more humane and effective migration policies. By amplifying the narratives of Albanian migrants, this research not only sheds light on their struggles and resilience but also underscores the universal human pursuit of dignity and belonging in the face of adversity.

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