

A fine balance

By Oscar Hemer

In the city centre of Albania's capital, Tirana, there is a strange building that inevitably attracts the visitor's attention although there is no mentioning of it in the official tourist information. It is a pyramid, eight storeys tall and covering an area of 17.000 square meters. It looks like a faded futuristic monument from a distant near-past, and it is completely trashed - entrances blocked, windows broken, walls covered with graffiti.

The strange building was erected in 1988 for the 80th birthday of the dictator Enver Hoxha, whose communist regime ruled Albania for more than 40 years. The most modern and extravagant construction in the country, in striking contrast to its dismal surroundings of concrete apartment blocks, the memorial to honour Hoxha was, however, short-lived. In 1991, less than three years after the inauguration, it was stripped of its exhibitions and the main statue of the former leader at the entrance was chiselled into pieces. The fate of the Pyramid has been the subject of heated discussion ever since. Part of the building was rented out to the major oppositional private radio and TV station, Top Channel, which still resides in the rear part of the ruined monument. Several attempts have been made to turn the former museum into a cultural center; in 2007 it was even named after one of the most famous opponents to the former regime, Pjetër Arbënor, who had spent 28 years in prison. To the generation who grew up in the '90s, it was most famous for a disco in one of the corners, called Momia (The Mummy). Finally, in 2010 the decision was made to demolish the building and lay down a new parliamentary complex in its place. This resolution has however not been carried out, partly due to protests from activist groups, and the Pyramid still stands as the only remaining testimony to the most extreme communist regime of Cold War Europe, which was in place little more than two decades away. Its only present-day comparison would be North Korea. I spent a week in Tirana in June as guest teacher in Research Methodology for the University of Tirana's Master in Social and Behaviour Change Communication, and asked the students to conduct a small investigation on the Pyramid and its role in the collective memory of transitional Albania.

The youngest students, born in the late '80s and early '90s did only have faint notions of those times, and apparently no particular interest in knowing more. For the older students, 30-years old and upwards, the Pyramid evoked memories of their own brainwashing as children. They were taught to love and worship the Leader and the Pyramid to them was a construction of unearthly beauty. All students were very open and out-spoken, yet I could sense that my curiosity struck a chord of discomfort.

The theme of this year's Ørecomm Festival is *Memory on Trial*, and I can't think of a better example to illustrate the complexity of the politics of memory in its relation to social change context than the fate of Enver Hoxha's Pyramid. On the one hand, this monument undoubtedly represents an important part of the country's modern history and cultural heritage, and has some, albeit disputable, aesthetic value. On the other hand, it is a symbol and reminder of one of the world's most gruesome dictatorships. If it were to be saved from demolition, which seems to be the popular opinion, the dispute that follows is whether it should be preserved in its current state of decay, or refurbished to its original shape. Any attempt at restoring its former glory would of course be an insult to the thousands of Hoxha's victims and their relatives.

In Albania, amnesia seems to be the most apposite term to describe the relation to the not too distant past. Sometimes, closing the book on the past may even be a condition for transition. That was the case in Spain, where the third and fourth generations of the victims of the terror during and after the 1936-39 Civil War are now coming forth, demanding recognition and justice for their murdered grand and grand grandparents. Spain, which used to be held up as the model for successful transition from dictatorship to democracy, is also an example of the perils of reconciling a contested past without undertaking a judicial process.

An even more striking example of the lingering consequences of silenced trauma is the partition of India in 1947, which displaced some twelve million people and caused the death of up to one million in gruesome communal violence. No official memorial has ever been raised over the victims of the Partition. In other places, like present-day Russia and China, even times of horrific terror and repression tend to be permeated by nostalgia in the public memory. It is a fine balance. An excessive memory culture may tend to turn us into prisoners of the past, impeding transformative change. Yet the opposite is obviously a thousandfold worse: Those who do not remember the past are, to use philosopher George Santayana's oft-quoted words, condemned to repeat it.

But what then does memory have to do with Communication for Development? Long-term social change and development are of course largely a matter of communicating the experiences of one generation to the next. The historical dimension seems the more important today, when we are living under what has wittily been called the tyranny of the moment. Living memory is therefore not only the theme of the third Ørecomm Festival, but also a crucial element of the first PhD position in Communication for Development at Malmö University, to be announced simultaneously with this issue of Glocal Times. The position will be one of two interregional PhDs, in collaboration between the universities of Malmö and Roskilde (just like the Ørecomm Festival), and their overarching theme is "Histories and Dynamics of Globalization, Communication and Development".

You'll be sure to read more about this project in coming issues of Glocal Times. Meanwhile, enjoy this issue's line-up, including articles by recent graduates of Malmö's Master's degree programme in ComDev.

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