

# Feud narratives: contemporary deployments of *kanun* in Shala Valley, northern Albania

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## ABSTRACT

The Albanian blood feud (*gjakmarrja*) is here documented through survey data and oral narratives of feud incidents in order to assess how these conflicts are initiated, the chronological sequence of events that involve the victim, the perpetrator and corresponding kin-groups along with parties involved in the mediation of the feud and the intervention strategies that are practised, and how these are informed by multiple understandings of customary law. Within an honour-driven context, *gjakmarrja* is a way of redressing the loss of an individual's or family's honour (*nder*). In a context where individual actors and kin-groups accumulate a feud performance history, blood feud regulates the flow of public insults upon individuals' and kin-groups' moral and social worth in both private and public domains. Our data further suggest that diverse understandings of the traditional law locally known as *kanun* inform feud relations. Enactment and re-enactment procedures do not always culminate in settlement of feuds. Instead, various interpretations of customary law often serve as a justification of and sometimes a catalyst for more feuds. Operating alongside, and often in opposition to, state and transnational legal frameworks such as human rights legislation, customary law and its diverse local manifestations may facilitate rather than deter the intergenerational persistence of blood feud conflicts.

**KEYWORDS:** blood feud (*gjakmarrja*), honor (*nder*), honor killing, customary law (*kanun*), conflict resolution, northern Albania.

## Blood feud in northern Albania

The association of blood feud with northern Albanian communities has been a common theme of both journalistic and scholarly reports on the region. In December 1972, *The New York Times* reported how 'blood feuds plague a Yugoslav province' (Anderson 1972). The article was a news clip about the Albanian *gjakmarrja* as it was documented amongst the

Albanians of Kosovo. In addition to a ‘concerning and unstable situation’ attributed to ongoing rural feuds (Gjuraj 2000: 61), contemporary Albania is complicated with the appearance of urban feud carried out in the traditions of northern Albanian customary law (see for example Voell 2003). Some 73% of all murders and violent deaths in Albania in 1997 were classified as revenge killings (Human development report 1998). A recent *Sunday Times* report (Smith 2008) claims that 12,000 Albanian youths are trapped at home in order to avoid becoming targets of revenge killings. In the early 1900s influential ethnographers identified *gjakmarrja* as ‘family and collective vengeance’ (Hasluck 1954: 219) and as having a ‘religious quality’ or being ‘an offering to the soul of the dead man’ (Durham 1928: 162). *Gjakmarrja* is an institution of moral values that regulates the need for vengeance and the means of settlement. It is a ‘system of revenge killing’ (Vickers and Pettifer 2000) with blood or human life being its currency. While the taking of human life is against state law, infringements upon personal and family *nder* – the ‘Alpha and Omega of Albanians’ way of life’ (Lopasic 1992: 90) – continue to be settled in the tradition of northern Albanian customary law.

The northern Albanian regions have attracted considerable ethnographic attention, most notably by the writings of E. Durham (1863-1944), M. Hasluck (1885-1948), and R.W. Lane (1886-1968) who documented *gjakmarrja* and the use of *kanun* in the early 20th century (Durham 1909, 1928; Hasluck 1954; Lane 1923). The codified traditional laws that are handed down orally are also identified by current residents of the area as an indistinguishable part of northern Albanian life (see also Elezi 2000). At present, our interview data suggest that the *kanun* is referred to inform people’s administering of their lives in splitting their homes, inheritance, division of property, and marriage disputes, while acknowledging that there exists a conflict between customary and modern state law. *Kanun* laws dictate every aspect of life, marriage, hospitality, personal conduct, and even just retribution in cases of adultery, theft, and murder. They also clarify the manner and rights of retaliatory killing in order to restore honour to the offended party. The local people of the Shala Valley refer to revenge killing as *gjakmarrja* or ‘the taking of the blood’ but particular revenge killing may also be called *hakmarrja* or ‘the taking of that which is justly owed to you’ with *hak* in Albanian referring to justice. To activists and parties involved in blood feud settlements, *gjakmarrja* is also often referred to as *vëllavrasje* (brother killing) thus mobilising fictive kin-relations to include all members of an ethnic group as kin brothers (see for example Çetta 1999).

Even when Albania became an independent country in 1912, northern Albania was barely affected by the control of the central government and continued to follow the customary codes of the *kanun* perhaps also through the entire communist period (1945-1991). Northern Albanians generally attribute the current form of the *kanun* to the historical and somewhat mysterious figure of Lek Dukagjin (1410-1481), who is believed to have been a contemporary of Albania’s national hero Skënderbeg (1405-1468) and responsible for collecting the laws in the late 1400s (Elsie 2001:147). In 1933 the Franciscan priest S. Gjeçov (1874-1929) collected and arranged the code for an Albanian publication with entries on church, family, marriage, property, work, honour, and criminal and judicial law. Eventually the code was translated into English (Gjeçov and Fox 1989). Our data concur with Schwandner-Sievers’ (2001: 102–103) observation that while copies of the *kanun* are

available in many book kiosks in Albanian cities, the code is not generally transmitted via book reading. People deemed knowledgeable about the *kanun* receive their training in this complex body of customary law as an orally transmitted inheritance from the elders without any serious engagement with published manuscripts. The latter has been primarily the preoccupation of scholarly attention.

## Setting

The Shala Valley is one of the northernmost valleys in Albania, which still has no paved roads through to either Montenegro or Kosovo (Figure 1). Before the boundaries of Albania were first drawn in 1912, and even until the end of the Second World War, mule tracks leading to neighbouring regions were used as trade routes. These transnational routes linking the region with Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia were tightened under the grip of the authoritarian communist rule in Albania. The inhabitants of the Shala Valley are exclusively Catholic with no other religious minorities living in their territories. Their main subsistence strategies are a mixture of arable agriculture and pastoralism. Agricultural land is sparse while pastures are more abundant in the higher mountain areas. People report that the planting of corn, beans, potatoes, and other vegetables has always



Figure 1: Shala Valley research area in northern Albania and surrounding region. (Courtesy of M. Galaty)

been a part of their subsistence base, supplementing the pastoral products of domesticates like cows, sheep, goats, and pigs. Prior to the Second World War, the traditional markets of Plavë and Gusi in present-day Montenegro, and Pejë and Gjakovë in present-day Kosovo (Figure 1.) were utilised to purchase flour – sometimes in trade for pastoral products – since small-scale farming did not suffice to feed Shala families year-round. The demands on manual labour imposed by an inhospitable environment are intense. According to local testimonies, the loss of human life to blood feuds was a loss of much needed labour at best, and the end of whole patrilineal lines at worst, when the last male survivor was targeted.

From the late 1960s, under communism, land and animals were collectivised in the mountains and the villagers secured their livelihood through wage work for cooperatives. The iron grip of the authoritarian regime succeeded in bringing the region under state control. Blood feuds were outlawed and their numbers plunged considerably but did not amount to a total absence of feud relations. The regime disarmed the population and criminalised revenge killings but even this measure did not entirely eliminate the feud, according to survey data that document an antagonistic yet continued co-existence of state and customary law. In the early 1990s, blood feuds re-emerged in post-communist Albania. Disputes over boundaries and water rights, in particular, reactivated dormant feuds. These feud conflicts appeared to be informed by the precepts of customary law recognisable as the *kanun* or the ‘law of the land.’ The obligations of customary law are part of Albanian lives at home and abroad (see also Schwandner-Sievers 1999 and this volume; Lopasic 1992).

The emptying of villages from the northern Shala uplands into the western lowlands continues to the present. Of the 249 registered families of Thethi, at the northern end of the Shala Valley, in 1991, only about seventeen families remained in the village throughout the winter of 2005, although a large number returned to their Thethi homes in the following summer. Of the seventeen full-time resident families, only twelve remained over the winter of 2007. While most families relocate to a particular suburb of Shkodër for permanent or winter residence, others have found their way abroad to Italy, Greece, western European countries, and some as far as the United States of America and Australia. The financial help from abroad for the three-fourths of families with emigrant relatives is crucial for their survival. Lack of employment in the Shala Valley is the prime reason for emigration, although the villagers also voiced the strong need for adequate electricity, schools, roads, a hospital, and an emergency evacuation service. Currently the Valley receives a small number of backpackers and mountain hikers, particularly from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Italy. It is generally implied by the locals in their daily discourses that the government supplies only limited funds to the villages and this comes by way of emergency relief in the winter. State sources reportedly claim to support the functioning of a regional school, a veterinarian, a nurse, and various district administrative staff like the village chief (*kryeplaku*). The village chief manages the government aid to his village and represents the village in regional structures of the government. Despite the population decrease in the valley, we encountered a history of feuding from almost all those who responded to our interview questions with some narratives spilling over onto the more recent resettlements in urban contexts.

In terms of architecture as a visual manifestation of a feuding society, outer appearance shows a common renovation pattern, namely the enlargement of windows. Almost all old houses were originally built with small *frëngji* windows specifically, according to local testimonies, to offer protection from feud attacks but probably also for better heat containment in the harsh winters. Many houses still have these characteristic windows (Figure 2). The window expansion may coincide with a decrease in the frequency of blood feuds in the region. Given the testimonies of Shala inhabitants we can be sure that there is a vivid memory of feuding, accounts of which are listed in a tabular format in Table 1. Ten out of a total of eighteen interviewees (55%) in the 2005 season reported a feud incident that implicated their *fis* (defined in the section that follows) in the past and, surprisingly, several of them were incidents within kinrelated neighbourhoods or wards (*mëhallë*) composed of patrikin conglomerations of households, while other feuds were reported to be within close families. Each incident followed a particular routine and the narration of this routine relates to local understandings of customary law of cause and effect conflict patterns and their respective settlements.



*Figure 2: Typical alpine house construction (left) and kulla (fortified tower, right) utilised as defensible shelter against feud attacks.*

## Kinship organisation

The villages in the Shala Valley are exogamous as all families are distantly related to a common apical ancestor or the founder (*i pari i fisit*). The Albanian *fis* has been generally treated as brotherhood (Halimi 2000), clan (de Waal 1996; Saltmarshe 2000), and tribe or clan (Young 2001; Saltmarshe 2001; Voell 2003). Here we make a distinction between *fisi i madh* (lit. big *fis* or clan) and *fisi i vogël* (lit. small *fis*, brotherhood or patrilineage). Ulqini (2003: 34–53; 1995: 34–65) outlines the northern Albanian distinctions between the two in terms of size with the former consisting of more than one hundred households and found in more than two villages whereas the latter consists of five to ten kin-related households, rarely containing as many as fifty households. The other distinction between the two concerns the apical ancestors: there is almost no memory of the founder of the *fisi i madh*, who often appears as mythical ancestor from twelve to eighteen generations ago, but there is usually a specified genealogical tree leading to the apical ancestor of the *fisi i vogël* or the patrilineage known as *i pari i fisit* whose name is that of the corresponding *fis i vogël*. In everyday discourses, Albanians identify more frequently with *fisi i vogël* or the patrilineage especially when one is within their immediate spatial confines of the native territories such as within a village or *mëhallë*.

The *fis i vogël* or patrilineage is the kinship unit relevant to the blood feud and, furthermore, it is the nuclear family that often carries the burden of revenge and, as we will see, manages their own feud relations. *Familja* or the Albanian nuclear family (parents and their children along with the father's parents, or a son's wife and their children) are often defined by locals as 'all those who live under the same roof'. They are at the centre of the kinship system and function as an independent economic unit often settling their own affairs in relation to blood feud disputes. The *familja* is interchangeably referred to as *shtëpia* (lit. house, or household).

The members of each of the Shala Valley villages consider their community a *vllazni* or brotherhood. Most villages are organised around the *mëhallë*. Thethi, the northernmost village in the valley, for example, is internally divided into six such neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods are not exclusive to one particular small patrilineage (*fis i vogël*). We use the interlocutors' distinction here between *fis i vogël* (patrilineage or brotherhood) and *fis i madh* which is composed of several smaller brotherhoods. *Fis i vogël* identifies with the larger inclusive *fisi i madh* or clan and with a common apical ancestor in addition to another common ancestor who may be several generations closer to the living cohort. Most neighbourhoods in Thethi are predominantly populated by the members of a single *fis*, communally sharing their pastoral lands, located above the neighbourhoods in the surrounding mountains. While a rare occurrence, a family from one *fis* may currently own and live in a house located in the traditional territory of another. Additionally, most neighbourhoods own, maintain, and use their own corn mill. The neighbourhoods are also organised to pool labour for working the fields, the most efficient way to work the land both now and in the past. On weekdays the particular owner pays the participants for their labour in his fields and hosts a lunch for them. On Sundays such a group may work without compensation for a family in need, but again the celebratory lunch is provided in recognition of the participants' goodwill. We

observed this communal pooling of labour in operation and aside from being a charitable religious gesture, it also highlights the close-knit community that is socially organised based on locality and the premises of strict patrilineal descent.

## Methodology

As members of the Shala Valley Project (SVP) operating in the northern district of Shkodër within the confines of Shala Valley (Figure 1), we conducted ethnographic fieldwork and collected both structured and open-ended survey data. The broader aims of the SVP are to gain information on the interactions of Shala with the outside world and their changes over time, kinship organisation, and past and present subsistence strategies. Although we sought input from interviewees who volunteered their participation in our study about the potential and logistics of future economic developments in the region, especially in connection with ongoing work to establish the Cross Border Balkans Peace Park Project, our primary focus here is to present the ethnographic materials we have collected about conflict as it is found in local narratives of *gjakmarrja*.

We limit our use of the term ‘narrative’ to the oral transmission of feud incidents and their recollections that we were able to record when interlocutors were willing to share with us their family’s history and experience with *gjakmarrja*. Our interlocutors are primarily males, though sometimes females, who related their family histories in their capacity as heads of their households. The collection of feud data is possible, as our study shows, however feuding data sets in themselves are far from complete. Often we could not collect details on every feud event from multiple sources. In some cases there were no surviving members of a particular clan, or, sometimes, the ones that were found, were not willing to discuss their feud histories, as this would contradict their settlement agreement. The latter often demands that the pardoned party should not boast or otherwise indulge in discussing the details of a ‘settled’ feud or else cause its reactivation. Most of the narratives presented here were collected in the presence of other family members where crosschecking the information on certain feud events was possible. Table 1 outlines the parties involved, the motives for the initial killing as stated by interviewees, the year it may have started, its mediation status, and manner of mediation where applicable. Additionally these qualitative data sets consist of the available traditional resources that have been utilised towards conflict management, reconciliation, as well as its exacerbation. Feud grievances are often over seduction, abduction, runaway wives, or the refusal of a girl to marry the man she was betrothed to, which Durham (1928: 171) identifies with being ‘in fact at the root of very many feuds.’ In addition to these, we include cases over land disputes (Table 1: d, i, k) and some ‘anomalous’ feuds concerning killings of one’s own kin (Table 1: i through l). The latter killings are normally deemed ‘a waste of blood’ in the *kanun*, yet in our sample they make up 28% of the documented feud incidents.

We take account of data from twenty-eight structured oral interviews collected in the 2005 and 2007 month-long summer field seasons of SVP as well as feud narratives from many informal discussions. With the necessary permissions granted by local authorities and the participants’ written consent, we recorded conversations and also took handwritten notes which were later transferred into the project’s permanent database. Often the

interviews were recorded and transcribed in the local dialect of northern Albanian *geg*, which differs markedly from the southern *tosk* counterpart. We follow the proper Albanian rendition of Albanian toponyms using local variants for kinship and feud-related terminology. The structured survey data were jointly collected by both authors over a span of several hours per sitting and often over more than one sitting. They took place at respondents' homes. As the authors are competent in Albanian no interpreters were utilised for this study. The interviews sample several villages of the Shala Valley with some feud cases spilling over the traditional boundaries of Shala and into the northern city of Shkodër. The preliminary findings from these interviews give particular attention to *gjakmarrja*, leaving for another occasion the details of family composition and demography, marriage patterns, land use and household economy, social organisation, information on the living standards in the Valley, the local potential for development, and the sentiments towards the projected inclusion of the region in a transnational park system with neighbouring Kosovo and Montenegro. According to some sources, feuds may threaten to strike for a variety of reasons as even ordinary grievances may trigger the shedding of blood. These often involve kin-related neighbours who are not normally regarded as potential feud counterparts, but whatever the reason, its management and the duties and responsibilities of those involved, including bystanders who together contribute to a performative stage for feuding, appear to follow a 'script' which aligns more closely with local understandings of feud settlements than with the written versions of the corpus of customary law. The latter can be treated as an ideal version of customary law whereas in practice the management patterns of feud grievances vary tremendously from one case to the next. As a method for analysis, this study gains access to this 'stage' of feud performances through local accounts narrated to us by interlocutors deemed knowledgeable about their family's feud performance and histories or via verbal testimonies of those who have been present during a feud attack, like the bystander in the revenge staged by the following account of two sisters. The events of feuds under scrutiny are retrospective accounts of family histories as they pertain to feud relations. Whether the data collected through interviewees are fully accurate is an important question about which we as ethnographers may not answer with absolute certainty. However we are confident that having collected local testimonies on blood feuds, our data are undeniably samples of a local discourse. We subject these data to a systematic inquiry in order to arrive at local understandings about the blood feud. The assumption we employ is that the stage of local understandings we are concerned with here is accessible through local narratives of feud histories and relations as they are verbally reflected from local recollections. We can juxtapose these to other understandings of the feud found in the textual corpus of customary law, as well as, to some extent, that given by scholarly output. Using the latter as a basis for comparison, we attempt to understand something more of *gjakmarrja* and its ethnographic representations.



Parties involved	Initiated	Reason for initiation	Mediation status	Manner
a. Between 2 feuding <i>fis</i>	1991	Public insult - 2 victims	Not settled	Open
b. Between 2 feuding <i>fis</i>	1940s	Intended bride theft	Not settled	Family migrated abroad
c. Between 2 feuding <i>fis</i>	?	Killing	Same day	Reciprocated revenge killing
d. Between 2 feuding <i>fis</i>	1941	Pasture rights - 3 victims	Yes	Elders' mediation - <i>pleqni</i>
e. Between 2 feuding <i>fis</i>	1800s	Killing of one's guest	Yes	Reciprocated revenge killing by host
f. Between 2 feuding <i>fis</i>	~1918	Struggle with <i>bajraktar</i> 's men	Yes	Marriage transfers of two sisters
g. Between feuding parties	~1900s	Unknown	1920	Mediation by Franciscan missionaries
h. Between feuding families	1993	Struggle over woman getting married	Yes	Uneven number of victims
i. Within <i>fis</i> /patrilineage	1992	Land ownership rights	Yes	Settlement after attempted revenge
j. Within <i>fis</i>	~1900s	Killing of one's own kin	Yes	Expulsion of perpetrator by house burning
k. Within <i>fis</i>	1970s	Water rights - 2 victims	Yes	Even number of victims, justified revenge
l. Within kin-related <i>mëhallë</i>	1948	Killing of kin	Yes	Reciprocated revenge killing
m. Between maternal cousins	~1900	Marriage infraction	1935	Mediation: conditional settlement
n. Between maternal cousins	1997	Accidental shooting - unknown	Yes-conditional	Mediation rule: <i>gan</i> or accidental conditional

Table 1: Blood feud cases from oral histories and survey data collected by the authors in 2005 and 2007 field seasons of the Shala Valley Project in northern Albania.

## Various interpretations of *gjakmarrja*

... [O]f course they owe blood. That is why *gjakmarrja* never ends... they go after the wrong person instead of the one that committed the last killing and now they risk the loss of the last male survivor in their family ... (narrative of a northern Albanian bystander to an urban feud attack staged by two sisters in 1991).

*Gjakmarrja* is sanctioned killing that cleanses honour with blood to avenge a crime or infringement upon the honour of oneself or one's family (cf. Elsie 2001). The targeting of the murderer himself is anticipated by customary understandings, but in practice the pool of potential targets is extended to include the targeting of any male relative of the murderer. This being one of the many instances of disagreement between the textual *kanun* and local practice, the focus becomes the diverse ethnographic manifestations of the practice of feuding from local narratives that often differ markedly from what is deemed as customary law and its codified representations in the *kanun*.

Women's and children's lives do not normally feature directly in either retribution or reconciliation as their targeting is taboo. A woman's presence is deemed an inhibition to the act of killing but this is not to imply that females are not implicated in the taking and/or the settling of blood. Honour may require that a mother remind her son if he is 'owed blood' or that a sister who has no brother take revenge for their father's loss to feuding. In addition to losing their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons as potential feud targets, the isolation of men in the *kulla* further complicates women's lives, as they then have to take over the role of breadwinner in addition to domestic duties.

Such is the communality of tribal life that exactly whose life in a family with many male members should be taken in retaliation for a blood feud murder may not necessarily be specified. Avenging blood is not considered to be murder, and the pride of those

involved often prevents requests for state or police assistance. We know from survey data (Table 1) that grievances are linked to marriage, land, and property disputes, with popular discourse centring on issues of honour. Honour is restored by killing any male member of the offending family. Avenging honour involves the parties in a very systematic procedure according to customary law as found in the *kanun*, yet the ethnographic manifestations present blood feud as 'adapted to circumstances' rather than closely aligned to the textual tradition (Schwandner-Sievers 2001: 97). The following contemporary narrative of an urban feud incident explains the multiple and often contradictory understandings of *gjakmarrja*. It was given by a bystander in a blood feud attack staged by two sisters who were avenging the loss of their father by a feuding *fis*:

... [I]t was early in the afternoon that it happened. Two sisters carried out the revenge. They had never seen the *nip* [nephew, brother's son] of the man who had killed their father; the latter was serving his sentence for the crime committed. One of the sisters took aim at close range but the rifle did not fire. [T]he *kanun* did not matter that day for they tried again ... this time successfully executing their vengeful attack.

The interlocutor draws our attention to how badly this revenge was carried out especially when we consult the *kanun*. This testimony indicates that there exists a notion of proper and improper ways to take revenge; in the discourses of the blood feud encountered by the authors, locals voice their judgments of particular cases by reference to *kanun*. The latter does not refer to the written version of the *kanun* but rather to what local communities and individual actors deem as the law of the land. Different parties and individuals within the communities under study frame the corpus of traditional law in particular ways depending on their particular affiliations and situational interests. It is generally understood that the target is forgiven if aim is taken but the rifle does not fire. The local expression when aim is taken but the target survives the murderous attempt is '*e ka fal pushka*' or 'the rifle has forgiven him'.

This case is complicated by another set of concerns informed by understandings of what is an appropriate and expected reaction between feuding parties when blood is owed. It is generally accepted that upon the public announcement of a killing<sup>1</sup>, the victim's kin may take revenge upon any of the perpetrator's kin encountered in the first twenty-four hours of the assault. These local interpretations contradict customary law which emphasises the quick negotiation of a truce that allows the offender to attend his victim's funeral (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 166, Article 854 and 856). Normally, male targets are honoured as their blood is the currency that settles the feud, under the premise that 'the value of a man's life is the same whether he is handsome or ugly' (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 170, Article 887). While the codified *kanun* apparently regards the value of human life the same, the loss of life is not experienced equally by all; more grievous forms of bereavement like losing a wife, guest, or child to a feud attack have often led to double or even triple vengeance (Hasluck 1954: 235). Nor does the textual *kanun* correspond to Hahn's (1854:

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<sup>1</sup> Code 844 of *Kanun* (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 164) states: '[A]s soon as a murderer has killed someone, he must inform the family of the victim, in order that there should be no confusion regarding his identity.'

241) observations of a local saying stating that ‘every man from my *fis* has an equal value of six other men altogether.’ After a tense twenty-four hour period following a killing, local narratives generally voice an expectation that the only sanctioned target should be the one who committed the crime. Scholars have interpreted the customary law in diverse ways and, similar to the local narratives of *gjakmarrja*, highlight its patterned enactment informed by diverse interpretations of customary law:

[T]he custom of blood was a solemn duty recognised by both sides and carried out according to rule ... (Durham 1928: 170)

[T]he murderer may not dare to take the victim’s weapon. If he commits such a dishonourable act, he incurs two blood-feuds ... (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 164, Article 847)

[T]he murderer must inform the family of his victim and ensure that the body be transported home. He must also see that the victim’s rifle be returned to the family and ... for a twenty-four hour cease-fire, he is even expected to attend a victim’s funeral ... (Durham 1909, cf. Elsie 2001: 44)

The specific rules of *gjakmarrja* are not always understood the same way by all. At his first judicial hearing, the assassin of Azem Hajdari, who committed the crime because of personal insults, declared: ‘I am too young [42 years old at the time] to know the *Kanun* in detail ... Hajdari offended me and I defended my dignity’ (Krasztev 2002: 37). Variations through time and across space as well as multiple understandings of what is accepted as legitimate feud behaviour complicate the textbook narratives of the feud. Textual representations of codified law are in themselves regionally diverse with numerous *kanuns* operating in different regions of northern Albania such as *Kanuni i Skënderbeut* (Illia 1993), *Kanuni i Maleve të Dibrës* (Martini 2003), *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit në Variantin e Mirditës* (Meçi 2002). Local narratives considered here generally agree that in the first twenty-four hours after a killing any kin member of the offending party may be taken out if encountered by victim’s kin. *Kanun* treats revenge killings within the first twenty-four hours as avenging blood (thus not incurring punishment) whereas killings after twenty-four hours are not deemed as avenging blood but incurring it (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 168, Article 871 and 873). Kin here refers to fathers, brothers, paternal cousins, paternal and sometimes even maternal uncles. A southern Albanian proverb states that ‘*nipi për dajon e shtie*’ (lit. a nephew [sister’s son] may take revenge for his uncle [mother’s brother]) although various conflicting alternatives are noted by Hasluck (1954: 222) favouring, amongst others, the avenging of the nephew by his maternal uncle. In the case of the two sisters the proper target should have been their father’s killer who was serving a jail sentence for his crime. The blood from the victim of the revenge may be avenged by his own father and especially by the victim’s own brother who, according to the interlocutor’s account of the event, may well reason: why punish my son/ brother for a crime committed by my brother/uncle, especially when the perpetrator is still alive? The principle of kinship closeness applies to feud relations. That is, the closest patrikin to a feud victim is often the one to take revenge. Because each household operates as an independent entity, feud responsibilities are also managed internally within each household. The above line of rea-

soning was voiced by the interlocutor and was individually confirmed in a number of occasions as a widely accepted understanding of feud responsibilities.

Local understandings reflected in our survey data are in agreement with the earlier version of the *kanun* that holds the murderer as the only one to incur the blood feud. The later version extends the blood feud to all males in the family of the murderer including an infant in the cradle, cousins, and close nephews who may be targeted in the first twenty-four hours whereas after this stage only the perpetrator is targeted. His kin and especially those kin members who are not either brothers, fathers, father's father, sons, or son's sons and who don't normally share the same residence are not normally targeted (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 172, Article 898 and 900). More than a year after their father's death, the sisters did not go after the assailant in taking revenge. Instead, by killing the assailant's brother's son, they initiated a new feud that now implicates the targeted boy's family and theirs. These narratives of inappropriate targeting are not new. Lane (1923: 30–31) documents an incident where a husband shot and killed the son of his wife's abductor. The latter intended to capture a bride for his son and according to law the abductor, not his son, should have been killed. Krasztev (2002: 54) reports a certain foreign mediator who visited an offended family over a period of six months and unsuccessfully attempted to convince them not to kill the murderer's three-year-old son but to wait instead a few years for the father to get out of prison. These accounts give an impression of a 'maze without a logical solution' (Post 1998: 31) because the act of killing is rooted in primordial ties of blood and honour. These feud narratives reflect diverse and often conflicting understandings of tradition that invite closer attention to anthropological inquiries into honour killings.

## **The relevance of kinship and social organisation to conflict and its resolution**

While most feuds are initiated between rival brotherhoods, they may also be a product of conflict within a village united through direct and traceable kin links to a particular male ancestor. In the following case, a feud was started within a *fis* by a brother who threatened his own brothers and later shot over the roof of a house belonging to his own kinsman (*fis* A). The owner of the house shot five times to give the signal to the Shala *bajraktar*<sup>2</sup> who organised his armed men to appear at the place of dispute; the six men who appeared at the scene were from *fis* B. It is the norm that in order to resolve disputes, the *bajraktar* asks the parties involved for tokens (*pengje*), which could be something of value such as a

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<sup>2</sup>The *bajraktar* or banner holder – a position still recognized today as a hereditary title rather than an actual office – is a man who is vested with the power to represent the region in times of conflict, raise troops for military expeditions, and carry out the decisions of *pleqni*. The *bajraktar* for the regions of Shala, Shosh, and Mirditë was appointed by the Ottoman Vezir residing in Shkodër, however a *bajraktar* may also earn this hereditary title of honor by capturing the flag of the enemy in war. Shala is now the only region in northern Albania with two *bajraktars* – one appointed and the other having had earned the title through success in battle – who together shared the duties, responsibilities, and privileges of the office.

watch or a gun. These may only be returned when each party selects an equal number of elders to represent them in the Council of Elders (*pleqni*) where the dispute is debated with the aim of reaching a settlement. The *bajraktar*'s men are paid for performing their service; for this occasion one sheep per mediator was reported by an interviewee to be an appropriate payment in pre-communist northern Albania. In this case they obtained the tokens or *pengje* from *fis* A. They also asked for these tokens from neighbouring *fis* C, even though the latter was not directly involved with this dispute. *Fis* C refused to give these tokens. Upon their refusal, the *bajraktar*'s men fired shots and in doing so, eight people were killed, resulting in a feud between *fis* B and C. Two weeks later two men, one from each *fis*, stumbled upon one another, fired shots and killed each other, bringing the grim score to six to four with *fis* C having lost fewer men in this exchange of fire. The *pleqni* gathered together and decided that the best way to settle the dispute was by having two young sisters from *fis* C (seventeen and eighteen years old) transferred in marriage to two men from *fis* B. They would replace the two extra men from *fis* B and in this way, it was reasoned, the score was even. Durham (1909: 30) notes that 'it is usual also to give a daughter in marriage to some member of the offended family, and thus establish peace.' The families discussed above have maintained friendly relations since that time.

As mentioned in the section on kinship organisation, the villagers of the Shala Valley consider their community to be a *vllazni* or brotherhood. A *vllazni* may be mobilised when any member of the community is implicated in a blood feud, especially during the first twenty-four hours after a killing has occurred. During this time any member of the family may be targeted by a conflicting party. In case of loss each member from the offended party is obliged to target the perpetrator or perpetrator's kin. Feuding poses responsibilities and obligations in a context where personal honour and performance in the public arena is closely linked to that of the actors' patrikin. The clan (*fisi i madh*) is reportedly able to be mobilised for regional warfare or to defend national territories.

In the case of the two sisters, they targeted the perpetrator's brother's son and thus took out a member of the *fis* that owed blood to them. However, the nuclear family is the smallest kinship unit that manages its own affairs; thus, the victim's father and brother are now owed blood because the revenge should have been sought elsewhere given that the assailant was still alive. As it stands now, the latest victim's family did not owe blood and now feels compelled to avenge the blood of their lost son who was wrongfully targeted to avenge a crime committed by victim's father's brother.

Despite the communist regime's apparent success in suppressing most blood feuds, the fall of communism in 1991 and the decollectivisation of land led to new problems related particularly to land and property ownership and water rights within the context of 'total scarcity' that characterises the northern mountainous regions of Albania (de Waal 1996). Many old feuds were rekindled. A family living in a village outside Bajram Curri (visited by Young in 1994 and 1995) came under a new threat, even though the man from their family who had committed a blood feud killing had himself died seventeen years ago. The perpetrators's death did not satisfy the indebted family who sent a warning that they expected 'blood payment' in the form of the life of a male member of the remaining family. The family under threat consisted of a widow living with her two sons, their wives, and

several children. The family had already adjusted to the threatening situation: the eldest son had gone into hiding elsewhere, and the younger remained indoors, unable to leave the house. Obviously this situation had a drastic effect on the earning capacity of the family. The case, which is still unresolved, was already in the hands of the National Reconciliation Committee, but the process was moving extremely slowly, partly due to the fact that the threat came from a family in a distant and remote region.

The situation under communism in Albania was complicated by the collectivising of arable land leaving two *dylym* (the equivalent of 100 x 10 meter lot) of arable land per family. This led to extended families splitting into smaller households in order to retain more land. Traditionally, splitting the family involves an intricate process that has evolved over decades following the laws of the *kanun*. It is at this stage that, quite commonly, family discord ensues, sometimes necessitating the assistance of competent mediators. Traditionally, should a killing transpire, this would not lead to a further killing, for it would be considered as a waste of one's own blood whose revenge only takes more members of the same kin-group away and doubles loss that may not be avenged. However, with changing interpretations of the *kanun*, this provision does not prevent feuds within any one *fis* or the killing of one's own *fis* normally regarded as 'killing one's self' and the victim's blood as 'lost' (Hasluck 1954: 210). During our interviews, we investigated similar blood feud situations (Table 1: i - l) comprising 28% of our sample.

One particular household we visited represents the traditional extended family referred to by both earlier scholars and more recent ethnographies of northern Albania (see for example Hasluck 1954: 27). One of the largest families now in Thethi, has 14 members from three generations residing under one roof. This inter-generational household includes two brothers and their nuclear families composed of their wives and children and the brothers' parents, with the eldest man in the compound playing the role of *i zoti i shhtëpisë* or head of the household. Most households in the village are smaller due in large part to emigration. Based on the testimony of the Elders extended families may not have been as widespread in earlier times, as has been portrayed in the literature. As Kaser (2002 and references therein) demonstrates, studies which focused exclusively on extended households have often led to the impression that extended households were more prevalent than they may have been in the past. It is clear now that there has been a massive exodus of families since the fall of communism in the early 1990s, slower at first, but particularly dramatic immediately after the disasters of 1997, and again in the first years of the new millennium.

## **The forgiveness of blood in narratives of mediation and reconciliation and some ensuing problems**

Oral histories and archival materials, such as historical photography, registers, and the accounts of clergy and travellers, suggest that blood feuds and mechanisms for their resolution have long existed, especially in stateless societies where tribal concepts of political organisation persist. Resolution served the purposes of defence of family, clan, or tribe, and involved both groups and individuals. Mechanisms for reconciliation include various ritual means, for instance, exchange of valuables such as food stuffs, tools, cloth,

money, or women. In rural contexts, there are many mediation options including family mediation, clan resolution processes, and mediations by religious leaders. The Franciscan priests in northern Albania (Durham 1928: 164) or the Bektashi *babas* (lit. father, Sufi *shaykhs*) in the northern Albanian districts of Kukës and Dibra (Kaliçani 1997) are examples of clergy intervening in settling feuds.

Partly to afford themselves protection from perpetual attack, feuding societies are known to practise counter-aggression techniques with reconciliation as a central element of the feud (i.e., Boehm 1984; for a similar account in Zagori, Greece, see Campbell 1964). An important contribution of the *kanun* is its prescription for mediation and conflict resolution closely aligned to localised forms of traditional law (Gjeçov 1999, articles 965–68). Although the *kanun* specifies that a mediator ‘may be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, or even a priest’, the role of the mediator according to collected oral histories is usually taken on by the revered male elders (Gjeçov and Fox 1989: 138, Article 669). Mediation by the *pleqni* (Council of Elders) is a paid position with more experienced mediators often reimbursed double the amount given to less experienced ones (Ulqini 1991: 128). Monetary incentives often lead to frustration during reconciliation proceedings. Additionally, mediation is frustrated by the precarious position of the local mediators themselves who are often unable to please both parties and thus justify their compensations with the services they provide. A local proverb states that ‘it is more courageous to forgive than to kill’ (*‘ai që fal është më trim se ai që vret’*), indicating a preference for settling ongoing feuds through forgiveness yet acknowledging that forgiveness is difficult to accomplish when the obligations to avenge owed blood with more blood and not blood money is deemed fair by customary law. Let us note here that ‘blood money’ or money that may be paid to the party that has incurred the most casualties in a settlement proceeding is not generally regarded as a very honourable way to settle grievances according to local sentiments expressed in collected testimonies.

While the council’s rule is enforced by the *bajraktar*’s men, the families of the mediators often invite human loss to their own families as a result of hard feelings that may remain in the post-settlement stage. In the village of Lekaj, further south down the Shala Valley from Thethi, three *kullas* were built in the late 1800s by five households of the same *fis* as a precaution in cases when it became necessary to seek refuge from blood feuds. In building them, a prayer was said, wishing that they would never be used. This was explained with the analogy of having a gun: while it was good to have one in times of need, it remained unused in a safe place during peaceful times. Local oral history tells that only one of these *kullas* was ever used as a place of refuge, and only for two weeks, during which time a settlement was reached through the marriages of two sisters. We could perhaps infer that at the time there was a *kulla* building enterprise in the region. Moreover, it is believed that the chances of feuds are greater for stronger and more affluent *fis*. In settling a feud new conflicts can also arise. These households contained the more well-to-do families who supplied most of the men for the Council of Elders and this put them at risk of finding themselves in feud disputes initiated because their men did not settle certain cases as expected by the *pleqni* proceedings. The explanation for this was that the settling of a feud is predisposed to cause more feud conflicts within the community. Often

neutral intermediaries coming from outside the region are thought to result in more successful outcomes. According to local testimonies, these have been more successful when the mediators are well versed in local customs and the *kanun*.

Since the fall of communism, there have been initiatives to resolve blood feuds by instilling a change in attitude concerning revenge, stressing the need for forgiveness. It necessitates creating the understanding that honour need not necessarily demand killing, but might be attainable through negotiation, understanding, and forgiveness. Founded in 1995, the National Reconciliation Committee (*Komiteti i Pajtimi Mbarëkombëtar*) is probably the largest of several voluntary organisations of elderly, experienced, and revered men. They claim a high success rate, but there are not sufficient workers, finances, or resources to focus on all the feuds that remain active today. The committee members act on feuds in which one party, usually the one who ‘owes blood’, has asked for mediation assistance. The committee is unable to provide protection and its members’ only tools are words. The committee’s object is to mediate negotiation between the parties for an acceptable solution so that neither side loses face. A further aim of the National Reconciliation Committee is to change people’s attitudes through education. They publish a journal *Pajtimi* (lit. reconciliation) that provides discussion of theories, problems, and solutions including contributions from international experts. Foreign groups such as the Nordic Consulting Group have collaborated with the National Reconciliation Committee in their attempts to curtail the persistence of blood feud in Albania.

Often blood feuds are settled by payments to the party that has incurred the most damage. Sometimes a part of the blood feud mediation will be to gain a *besa* (oath, promise, a binding word of honour) giving one or more of the family members otherwise under threat a promise of unhindered work at certain times (e.g., in times of harvest) and/or in certain places. Families tend to leave the area permanently if the likelihood of a settlement is slim. Relocation away from native territories may be the requirement of blood feud settlement (Table 1: c). As may be the case with other feud settlement agreements, in the case just cited, the party that owed blood settled it by agreeing to the condition that they leave their ancestral lands where they would otherwise be an unbearable presence and a continual reminder of the human loss that they have caused to their feuding counterpart. Other settlement arrangements employ this strategy and often the argument employed during negotiations is that ‘they are forgiven as long as we [the feuding parties in question] do not cross paths in public’ or ‘forgiven as long the party involved in killing last does not make another mention of it’. Both of these conditions include a clause that brings our attention to the precarious nature of settlement. The agreement includes conditions under which the settlement may be nullified. Often settlements are broken by parties crossing paths in public and/or the party that carried out the last feud attack publicly boasting about a settled feud.

Schwandner-Sievers notes that ‘... both killing and reconciliation are ritual actions justified in terms of reference to *kanun* and are both integral to local processes negotiating social status. ... “reconciliation” constitutes probably the only element of *kanun* which is widely perceived to be compatible with both state law and NGO [*non-governmental organizations*] requirements’ (2004: 113, 115, emphasis in the original). Blood feud reconciliation



can only be performed by intermediaries who are not related to the families, clans, or tribes in dispute. Usually mediators are older respected males from the community, if the parties are of one community, or from a wider alliance group which embraces both parties (region, country, etc.).<sup>3</sup> The process of reconciliation is extremely slow and sensitive, and may only yield results after years of negotiation. Negotiators between feuding parties are very careful not to allow the delicate transactions to be observed by those not directly involved in the conflict undergoing reconciliation. In this respect, film and television crews have sometimes been disruptive and actually caused further aggression.

In present-day Albanian society, successful reconciliation concludes with agreement by the offending family to repay the 'blood debt' in such a way that the aggrieved family can accept the murder of one of their own. This payment may take the form of money or livestock. It could also be the removal of the offending family to a minimum-stated distance from the village. Of prime importance in this payment is the perception that the compensation is sufficient to uphold the honour of the offended family within the surrounding community so that no one could make the charge that their victim's and hence their family's *fis* and the community's lives were dishonoured. The resulting *besa* is considered to be a lifelong promise – a religious utterance by which the user is considered legally bound. Additionally, offering women in marriage to the *fis* who has incurred more blood feud casualties has turned feuding *fis* into *miq* or friends of the family via marriage alliances (Table 1: f).

In outlining reconciliation between the family of the victim and the family of the murderer, there is further instruction on the accomplishment of this reconciliation and the part of guarantors of such reconciliation. When the mediation is successful and reconciliation achieved, a ritual *buka e pajtimit* (meal of peace) is served by the murderer's family, in their home, to the mediators who are normally paid for their services, the victim, and his relatives and friends (Gjeçov and Fox 1989, Article 982 of the *kanun*). Only after all of the above have been completed and any negotiated payment made should the cross be made on the offender's house as a 'sign of reconciled blood' (Article 983 of the *kanun*).

The giving of the *pengje* is also a commitment to accept the Elders' decision on the dispute in hand. If the decision of the Elders is not accepted, the *bajraktar* (who is reported not to take part in the negotiations) enforces the decision of the Elders via his men. Such enforcement may involve cutting down trees owned by the party not respecting the decision of the Elders, the destruction of terrace walls on their property, the burning of their house, or even their forced expulsion from the village.

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<sup>3</sup> The late well known and charismatic folklorist, Anton Çetta (1999) was active in the mass reconciliations between Kosovar Albanians, ending the cycles of revenge for as many as 1,200 family feuds at one extraordinary event. The mass gatherings were arranged in open spaces, including football fields, without public notice, but by word of mouth as public meetings were forbidden in Kosovo at the time by Milosević's rule of the 1990s. By averting the risk of being discovered by the Serb authorities, solidarity amongst Albanians actually increased, which in turn lessened the likelihood of new blood feuds and eased reconciliation.

According to local testimonies, the proceedings of the Council of Elders are as follows: Party A presents their case through the Elder member that they have chosen to represent them. The other side presents their case through an Elder whom they have chosen. Each Elder may be paid the equivalent of one working day by the party they represent or they may participate in the Council on a voluntary basis; such Elders are known to have a genuine interest in bringing about a settlement that will end the ongoing feud and are universally highly respected. After both sides present their case, the Elders confer with one another, and their decision is passed on to the *bajraktar* for enforcement. Disputes between paid and unpaid Elders often obstruct a final settlement. This is because payment for the Council is only made once a settlement has been reached and thus some Elders have an interest in reaching a settlement to obtain financial gains. Thus the inability to reach a settlement often places even those who collaborate as Elders at odds with the parties they represent in the proceedings. As a result, accusations of unfair counsel and inadequate efforts to reach a settlement often find the families of the Elders involved in new conflicts with the families of those they represent. There is a saying '*kur rregullon edhe prish*' ('when you settle [one dispute], a new one is started'). The manipulation or third party phenomenon observed elsewhere in 'strict patrilineal systems' (cf. Lindholm 1981) and traditional judicial configurations can be as much a stabiliser of conflict as its catalyst.

## **Concluding remarks: prospects for the settlement of the feud**

Due to rapid changes during the past two decades, traditional systems have become eroded without the benefit of replacement by modern law. In the past, personal, family, and *fis* honour operated as traditional law; however, understandings and applications do appear as adaptations to local situations. Multiple interpretations of *kanun* are mobilised by various individual and group actors not only to manage feud relationships but sometimes to justify its exacerbation. With the recent breakdown of state control in post-communist Albania, there is a need for a contract system. With many outside influences, the traditional *besa* does not always work; instead there is often misunderstanding, suspicion, and distrust. Distrust extends towards blood feud mediators, causing delay and failure in mediation and even further feuding. Outsiders or those not immediately implicated in the feud grievances provoke violence by providing an audience in front of which the patrigroup's reputation is at stake; they may also restrain violence by offering reconciliation support (cf. Herzfeld 1985: 80–81; Peristiany 1965). This account invites a closer look at the role of outsiders in offering a stimulus for vengeance and perpetuating *gjakmarrja*. Additionally, some conflicts are falsely given the name of a blood feud as this is seen as more honourable than murder or crime. In northern Albania, we found that conflict management may be better accepted from neutral intermediaries who must not be state officials or even local Elders as they may be heavily invested in existing sets of relations by their kin affiliations and interests.

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## POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava krvno maščevanje (*gjakmarrja*) v dolini Shalla v severni Albaniji. Predstavljeni so temeljni povodi za nastanek krvnih maščevanj; časovno zaporedje dogodkov, ki vključujejo žrtev, krivca in njuni sorodstveni skupini ter skupine posrednikov, vključenih v razreševanje tovrstnih sporov, pri čemer posredovanje temelji na razlikah v razumevanju tradicionalnega prava oz. kanona (*kanun*). Z vidika časti je krvno maščevanje poskus nadomestila izgube posameznikove ali družinske časti (*nder*). Z vidika časovnega razraščanja spora preko dejanj posameznikov ali skupin, pa je krvno maščevanje osnovni dejavnik, ki generira tok javnih žaljivk, ki se nanašajo na socialno in moralno vrednost posameznika ali njegove sorodstvene skupine. Etnografski izsledki nakazujejo, da razlike v razumevanju tradicionalnega prava bistveno vplivajo na odnose znotraj krvnega spora. Uravnavanje sporov skozi tradicionalno pravo se namreč ne zaključí vselej z razrešitvijo krvnega maščevanja, ampak njegove različne interpretacije pogosto delujejo kot opravičilo ali celo spodbujajo nadaljevanje maščevanja. Različna lokalna razumevanja tradicionalnega prava prej nasprotujejo kot pa se ujemajo z veljavnimi državnimi in mednarodnimi zakonskimi določili, kot so naprimer zakoni o človekovih pravicah, zato pogosteje prispevajo k medgeneracijskemu prenašanju krvnih sporov kot pa k njihovim razrešitvam.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** krvno maščevanje (*gjakmarrja*), čast (*nder*), tradicionalno pravo (*kanun*), razreševanje sporov, severna Albanija

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