

The Albanian *Kanun* in Ismail Kadare's *Broken April*

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"...a land within sight of Italy and less well known than the interior of America."

—Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), commenting on Albania¹

"April is the cruelest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land."

—T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), *The Waste land*²

Despite the globalization movement of recent decades there remain entire cultures and their literatures that go unnoticed in the great milieu that is the study of world literature. Even within smaller categories in academia, such as the realm of Slavic and Eastern European Studies, there are topics which go largely unexplored except by a select few at the doctoral level and beyond. Albanian literature is a vast and as yet untapped canon that deserves to be exposed and to be studied in undergraduate and graduate institutions, but which also needs to be made available to the general public. Albanian literature is so under exposed primarily because it was late to evolve. Of the Indo-European languages, Albanian is the latest separate language group to develop a literary culture, beginning as late as the seventeenth century (mostly among Catholic priests), and thereafter Albanian letters were suppressed by various non-Albanian polities. In the words of the foremost Albanologist, Robert Elsie, "The tender plant of Albanian literature grew in a rocky soil. Time and again it sprouted and blossomed, and, time and again, it was torn out of the earth by the brutal course of political history in the

¹ Elsie, Robert, *Early Albania: A Reader of Historical Texts, 11th-17th Centuries* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz KG, 2003), vii.

² Quote taken and citation from Beckwith, Christopher I., *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 263.

Balkans.”³ However, today the widespread availability of books through internet venues such as *Amazon.com* has helped, in some regards, to popularize authors and literary realms that in other times would have passed into obscurity among Western readers, and this phenomenon has served to minimally promote Albanian literature. And yet, the only Albanian-language author to enjoy an international reputation is Ismail Kadare (b.1936),⁴ who lives in self-imposed exile in France where his books are bestsellers (in French translation). In America and the United Kingdom, though, none of his books—even his praised *Chronicle of Stone* and *The Siege*—are bestsellers,⁵ and he is only occasionally to be found in retail book stores or on the shelves of public libraries. But to any would-be reader, the availability of his works (or lack thereof, as the case may be) should not be a deterrent, since sometimes the best literature is that which has to be painstakingly sought out or discovered by chance. The purpose of this paper is to bring a sampling of Albanian literature to the general liberal arts audience by introducing and making a study of Kadare’s dark novel *Broken April* (*Prilli i thyer*, 1978) and the way in which the novel utilizes the code of Albanian traditional law, the *Kanun*.

As noted, the *Kanun*—properly, *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* or *The Canon of Lekë Dukagjini*—is at the center of *Broken April*, and while it cannot be said that the *Kanun* itself is a character of sorts, as the city St. Petersburg has been considered in the Russian realist novel of the same name by Andrei Biely, the *Kanun* is so prominent that hardly a moment of the plot is

³ Elsie, Robert, *Albanian Literature: A Short History* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), v.

⁴ Elsie, *Albanian Literature: A Short History*, 167.

⁵ A survey of *Amazon.com* shows that Kadare’s highest ranking book, in terms of sales, is *The Siege*, which ranked 169, 598 out of all of *Amazon.com* sales, as of July, 2011. *Chronicle in Stone* and *The Ghost Rider* ranked below 500,000, and *Broken April* (discussed in this paper) ranked 275, 779.

unconcerned with the intricate legal system. Thus, it is only natural to observe the history of the *Kanun* and its major features, before embarking on a discussion of its usage in *Broken April*.

To begin with, the Albanian people are divided into two self-distinguishing groups, determined in large part by the dialect they speak and by geographical preponderance. In the south of Albania are the Tosk, who constitute a minority of the ethnic Albanian population both in Albania and abroad, and to the north, including the *Rrafsh*, Kosova, and the diaspora communities in Macedonia and elsewhere, are the Geg. It is the northern Geg who have historically utilized the *Kanun*.⁶ The *Kanun* as such was first written down and published (posthumously) by the Catholic Albanian priest and folklorist Shtjefën Gjeçov in 1933,⁷ after his murder by Serb extremists. However, the origins of the *Kanun* are to be sought after in the fifteenth century, and folk history claims it as the work of Lek Dukagjin (1410-1481)⁸—that the *Kanun* is the work of Lek Dukagjin is an assumption based on its relation to the Dukagjin family as a whole, perhaps on the basis that their lands were the region where this particular law code was enforced.⁹ It is unknown whether the *Kanun* had been written in any form before Gjeçov's version, but it is well attested that the law was passed on via the robust oral tradition that survives in Albania to this day.¹⁰ The *Kanun* is startling in its thoroughness, governing all aspects of life, and is divisible into eleven sections¹¹: church, family, marriage, household and

⁶ The *Kanun* is one of several such law codes, or constitutions, and it is by far the most prominent and well-known.

⁷ Mangalakova, Tanya, *The Kanun in Present-Day Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro* (Sofia: International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 2004), 2.

⁸ Mangalakova, *The Kanun in Present-Day Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro*, 2.

⁹ Malcolm, Noel, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 17.

¹⁰ Tarifa, Fatos, "Of Time, Honor, and Memory: Oral Law in Albania" in *Oral Tradition*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2008), pgs 3-14, 3.

¹¹ There is a twelfth section not applicable to the above context: "Exemptions and Exceptions." Mangalakova, *The Kanun in Present-Day Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro*, 2.

property, work, loans, pledge, honor, damages, protection, and judgment.¹² Famed Victorian amateur anthropologist Edith Durham noted in the 1920s, “Whenever in the mountains [of Albania] I asked why anything was done...I was told, ‘Because Lek said so.’”¹³

Kardare’s *Broken April* is an enchanting yet dark novel set in the Albanian *Rrafsh*¹⁴ which narrates the stories of newlyweds Bessian and Diana Vorpsi, and the highland mountaineer Gjorg,¹⁵ and how the lives of these three characters are drawn together—and upset—by the *Kanun*, particularly focusing on the destructiveness caused by the blood feud (*gjakmarrje*). At the heart of the plot is the blood feud in which Gjorg, and his family, are engaged: two generations ago Gjorg’s grandfather witnessed the murder of his guest, drawing the Berisha clan into a decades-long blood feud in which vengeance had to be meted out to the Kryeqyqe¹⁶ clan for the killing of the guest, because “when the guest whom you [are hosting] is killed before your eyes, you are bound to avenge him.”¹⁷ The blood feud lasts decades not because the Berisha clan fails to take revenge, but because the blood feud requires an endless chain of vengeance since Zef Kryeqyqe killed Gjorg’s brother and now Gjorg is bound to kill Zef, and thereafter a member of the Kryeqyqe must kill Gjorg, and so on. This unending cat-and-mouse competition between clans can, however, be appeased by the two families coming to terms and settling on a price for the last soul killed in the blood feud, much like the early medieval Germanic *wergeld*.¹⁸ Gjorg’s

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, 17-18. Durham goes on to explain that the *Kanun* gained more obedience than the religious statutes of Christianity and Islam.

¹⁴ The highland (*malësi*) plains of northern Albania, including parts of southwestern Kosovo and southern Montenegro.

¹⁵ Pronounced /jɔrg/; all pronunciations herein will be cited according to the IPA.

¹⁶ /kry.ɛ.cy.çɛ/.

¹⁷ Kadare, Ismail, *Broken April* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1990), 32.

¹⁸ Drew, Katherine, trans., *The Burgundian Code* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1976), 23. This is one of many late antique/early medieval Germanic law codes or *leges barbarorum*; others include the *Code of Euric* (480), *Dictum Rotaries* (643), *Lax Visigoth rum* (654), et cetera. The so-

murder of Zef opens the novel in mid-March, and he is granted a “long” *bessa*,¹⁹ giving him until mid-April to live, hence Kadare’s cynically realist title: unlike the April of every other year, or the April enjoyed by any other person, Gjorg’s is broken in two, one half during which to live and the other, to die.

Meanwhile, Bessian and Diana honeymoon away from 1930s Zogian²⁰ Tirana in the *Rrafsh*, moving from *kulla* to *kulla*²¹ and taking advantage of the elaborate hospitality system that governs the Albanian highlands; Bessian observes that “to an Albanian a guest is a demi-god.”²² By happenchance, Bessian and Diana glimpse Gjorg at an inn and this has an immediate psychological, even erotic, effect on Diana; he becomes for her the representation of the harsh reality of the *Kanun* and life in the *Rrafsh*. Throughout the story that unfolds—ending with Gjorg’s death at the hand of the *Kryeqyqe* appointed to murder him—the significance of the *Kanun* as a strict code of life for the Albanian mountaineers and, likewise, the semi-mythological status that the city-dwellers attach to their *Kanun*-dictated life, is explored, with the issue of the blood feud—ethically, as a traditional and romanticized custom, and even economically—at its center. This dichotomy, and its in-text interpretation by the *Vorpsis*, informs one of the central themes of the novel: the *Kanun*’s position between modernity and tradition. An examination of this role that the *Kanun* plays in *Broken April* is shown in the way that Kadare presents the *Kanun*’s governing body, the Princeship of Orosh, which allows the reader to explore the

called *wergeld* or “blood money” was an almost universal legal practice, but is characteristic of earlier Eurasian cultures.

¹⁹ Thirty-day truce in which the murderer (*gawks*) remains unharmed, but after which he is to be hunted down by the avenging family.

²⁰ It is obvious from repeated references to the Albanian monarchy that the story is set during this period, that of the reign of King Zog I (1928-1939), also known as Ahmet Zogolli or Zogu.

²¹ *Kulla* is a stone tower, used as a dwelling place in the *Rrafsh*.

²² Kadar, *Broken April*, 77.

personal and confusing commentary that this premier Albanian-language author has presented to non-Albanians.

In the words of Bessian, the Prince is “not exactly a prince...and yet, in a way, he’s more than a prince...because of the way he rules over all the High Plateau.”²³ In the homeland of the *Kanun*, where “neither police nor government had had any authority,”²⁴ the power of the Prince was founded on the *Kanun* and the entire *Rrafsh* bounded by it, so that the Princeship acted “like a temple of the law, an institution halfway between oracles and repositories of legal tradition.”²⁵ The Princeship of Orosh also operated on an economic basis, surviving in part on enfeoffment²⁶ but also on blood-taxes paid after every honor killing as part of the blood feud, a financial undertaking so extensive that it required the office of Prince of the Blood. Chapter Four (of seven) is an homage to the Princeship of Orosh, and operates as a critical analysis of the *Kanun* and the blood feud as a socio-economic system subject to the ebb and flow of history. Kardare reaches the climax of his discussion of the *Kanun* by introducing the Prince of Orosh’s brother, Prince of the Blood Mark Ukacjerra,²⁷ who makes his only appearance in this chapter, and who, more than any other character, is concerned with the upkeep of the *Kanun*. Kadare uses Mark’s unique position to pose the question of the *Kanun*’s place in a modern world and of the denigration of tradition in the face of modernity. While even the Prince of Orosh is modernizing, embracing Zogian visitors and world diplomats, and encouraging university

²³ Kadar, *Broken April*, 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁶ “Enfeoffment,” i.e. a lord-vassal system, commonly known as “feudalism,” though this term is marked and under debate by many medievalists.

²⁷ The book itself uses two spelling—an editorial oversight—but this is the more correct according to Albanian orthography (the “Ukacierra” spelling was most likely meant for ease of reading for the English speaker).

study, Mark is trapped in the “blood-feudology”²⁸ of the *Kanun*. Here, Kadare uses fictionalized scholarly works to critique the state of the *Kanun*: “one time elements of sublimity and grandeur in Albanian life had become denatured in the course of time, changing gradually into an inhuman machine, to the point of being reduced...to a capitalist enterprise.”²⁹ Kadare contradictorily provides readers with an image of the *Kanun* as both an outdated set of laws averse to modernism and a tradition as vital to the Albanians as the lifestyle of the highlanders and the national myth of the urbanites. This ambiguous portrayal of the *Kanun*, however, is necessary and is analogous to anthropological studies that consider the importance of tradition in defining identity, but weigh the moral consequences of destructive practices. Indeed, this theme is elaborated on by the most destructive aspect of the *Kanun*—the blood feud—and its repercussions in the broken April of Gjorg and the broken marriage of the Vorpsis, discussed above.

Ismail Kardare’s *Broken April*, like Durham’s *High Albania* of the 1920s paints the picture of a society living at the behest of the *Kanun*, and the few, privileged onlookers who become enamored by their own fantasies of the *Rrafsh*’s “fairies, mountain nymphs, bards, the last Homeric hymns in the world, and the *Kanun*, terrifying but so majestic.”³⁰ The *Kanun* may be understood in the context of its role as a framework for life in the Albanian highlands as portrayed through the devastation caused by the blood feud and the institution of the Princeship of Orosh. At the heart of the *Kanun* is tradition, unbroken for hundreds of years; at the heart of that tradition is the Princeship of Orosh. But the tradition and its upholding

²⁸ Kadare, *Broken April*, 141.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

institution—the entire framework of Albanian highland or traditional life—are weighed down by a push toward modernity, from within (Prince of Orosh) and without (the Vorpsis and flashbacks to conversations with Tiranites). Thus, Ismail Kardare, a self-exiled Albanian, calls into question the relevance of tradition in the face of modernity, a theme which may be interpreted broadly as a comment on Westernization and globalization,³¹ or as narrowly as a comment on the contemporary Albanian communist regime of Enver Hoxha³² (d.1985). Kardare’s use of the *Kanun* in *Broken April*, though a piece of obscure Albanian folk law to the outside world, evokes an interpretation pregnant with universality while providing a unique teaching experience for the reader uninitiated into the world of Albanology. It is in the rich context of Ismail Kardare’s novels and the works of other modern and classical Albanian authors that Albanian literature and culture should be made known to the world, as there is perhaps no better way—aside from language—to access and assess a people than through their literary output.

³¹ Ironically, the modernization is here affecting a “Western” peoples
³² / hɔdʒa/