

## THE CULTURE OF RELATEDNESS IN KOSOVO: THE ROLE OF KINSHIP IN THE PRIVATE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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DOI: 10.17234/SEC.30.7  
Original scientific paper  
Received: 5<sup>th</sup> March 2018  
Accepted: 14<sup>th</sup> October 2018

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*In societies like Kosovo, where the administration and state authorities fail to expand their authorities and care to citizens, kinship and social networks are domains that somehow fill this gap. In the Balkans, due to the inefficiency of the state authorities, up to the beginning of the twentieth century patrilineal kin groups in some sense represented the public sphere; in the case of Kosovo this was even later, namely up until the end of the twentieth century. Depending on specific historical, economic and political contexts, the kinship system turned into a system based on a combination of descent and marriage throughout the course of the twentieth century. In dealing with the question of what Habermas identifies as the public sphere – a sphere of private people who jointly form a public, meaning those people who did not hold public/official positions, my research intends to analyse interchangeable positions and roles that kinship has in relation to private and public domains – meaning the role kinship has in terms of family relations, social organization and the political system. This research is based on ethnographic data I collected over the years 2011-2015 in Isnj (a village located in the west of Kosovo).*

**Keywords:** Kinship, family, marriage, descent, public sphere, private sphere, social networks

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Under conditions where the administration and state organizations fail to expand their power and authority, it may eventually happen that

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<sup>1</sup> Tahir Latifi is a lecturer at AAB College & the University of Prishtina. This field research was undertaken as part of the project ‘The Kosovar Family Revisited’ (financed by the Austrian Research Fund – FWF) under the direction of Prof. Dr. Karl Kaser, and the project team consisted of Dr. Carolin Leutloff-Grandits, Dr. Elife Krasniqi and Dr. Tahir Latifi. This research has been completed as part of the authors PhD project.

kinship and/or other social networks will possibly come to substitute it. In the case of Kosovo – not only in the past, but also today – due to the fragility of the state establishment, where the administration and state authorities lack proper conduct, kinship and social networks are domains that somehow fill this gap. Under such circumstances, people in a sense were (and still are) forced to maintain strong kinship relationships and reciprocal help (solidarity) within and across generations. Kinship relations are embodied in people's everyday life, and thus are an integral part of the social, economic and political domain. "Kinship is defined in terms of genetic relatedness or the probability the two individuals will share a gene from a common ancestor" (Hruschka 2010:78). In the case of the Balkans, kinship previously consisted of, and in areas such as Kosovo still consists of, a group of persons linked through descendants of the male line (Kaser 2008:37). In contrast, European (Western) kinship structure is basically established through married couples (Schlee and Heady 2010:359), known as affinal or cognatic relationships. On the other hand, the household structure and kinship relations in Albanian families (and the Balkans generally) are identified by members who originate from the same patriline, as Kaser defined the complex family (Kaser 1994a).

Societies/communities that know and trace their descent through a common ancestor are known as lineages. Thus, those that are patrilineally structured – traced through male descent – are called patrilineages (Stone 1997). On the contrary, those that are traced through female descent are known as matrilineages. In this context, "a lineage is a group of persons differentiated genealogically from others in terms of unilineal descent" (Smith 1956:39). Kinship systems based on unilinear descent coincide strongly with ancestral worship. The worshipping of ancestors was widespread in Eurasian pastoral (and agrarian) societies irrespective of whether they were Christian (both Catholic and Orthodox) or non-Christian or Islamic societies, respectively. Thus, in the Balkans up to early decades of the twentieth century, the feast of the patron was the most famous annual religious feast. In South Slavic areas it is often called *Slava*, whereas Albanians called it *Festa* or *Feshta* (Kaser 1993:93–95). The name *Festa* seems to be appropriate to Albanian language while *Feshta* might be an orthographical error on the part of the author to whom Kaser referred, or because of in Croatian language this feast is called *fěšta*.

This paper aims to analyse the culture of relatedness in Kosovo, namely the role of kinship in the context of its functions and relations with authority from the perspective of inside (private sphere) and outside (public sphere) the home. Dealing with the question of what Habermas identifies as the public sphere – a sphere of private people who jointly form a public, meaning those people who did not hold public/official positions (Habermas 1991), my paper intends to analyse the interchangeable positions and roles that kinship has in relation to private and public spheres. Based on ethnographic experiences and fieldwork data that I collected in rural areas (in the west of Kosovo), and relevant literature, this paper focuses on analyzing the role of kinship not only in terms of family issues (the private sphere), but also scrutinizing its role in the public sphere, i.e. in public issues and in political and social organization, which have traditionally been integrated into the state institutions. Kinship plays a significant role, not only in the village community, but also beyond – within the state institutions. I argue that the political and social organization has been characterized by an assemblage of political and party structures with those coming from kin-based representatives. On this view, it should be mentioned that kinship plays a significant role, not only in the village community, but also beyond – within the state institutions. The paper is structured into two main parts: the first part deals with concepts of kinship and the role it has in terms of social relatedness; the second part is focused on the role of kinship in the public sphere, and more concretely it deals with issues and case studies from the village of Isniq.

## **WHAT IS KINSHIP AND WHAT IS ITS ROLE IN SOCIAL RELATEDNESS?**

In the introduction I briefly analyzed the concept of kinship, and I now move to analyse the role of kinship in terms of social relatedness. Hruschka differentiates between three levels of kinship closeness: immediate kin (parents, children, and full siblings); extended kin (grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews); and distant kin (full first cousins) (Hruschka 2010:79). As a practice, kinship's role "var[ies] considerably across societies, kinship relations *in general* entail the idea of rights and obligations," and in focusing on that, "it is this aspect of kinship that gives it social force" (Stone 1997:5–6). Relationships among kin can become

stronger if the relatives are capable of helping each other in the domain of work (Bott 1971:124). There are practical reasons to maintain relations, even beyond kin, for instance in finding a job or in gaining support for a professional career (Heady 2010:16). At the village level in Kosovo, solidarity within the *farefis* (blood kin) seems to be more as a result of the blood relations itself. Solidarity comprises the main elements that keep up the equilibrium of social cohesion within a kin group (Latifi 2016). In this view, one of my interviewees, Isak (around 57) stated: “Relations within *farefis* [the blood kin group] are rather maintained as a duty, and bound inherent by the blood line.” He further stated that “solidarity with Albanians is more concerned with spiritual feelings.” After the war (1998-1999), Isak suggested that people were not as solidary as earlier, saying that

“the element of solidarity that once was for instance even connected with money and help, i.e. any aid at work from anyone; this element has lost its glow, now it doesn’t exist, it is very meagre when comparing the pre-war period with now.”

In addition to rights and obligations, it should be underlined that (European) societies can be distinguished at the level of frequency of contact between kin, as:

“Different cultural patterns of solidarity do exist, there is evidence of ‘more’ sociability in southern and eastern Europe than in the north. In southern Europe, for instance in Italy, very frequent contact appears to be the social norm, while much further in the north, as in Sweden, the model of less frequent but often quite ‘intensive’ family gatherings on special occasions (e.g. birthdays, joint holidays) is more common” (Grandits 2010:38).

Viewed in this context, Kosovo fits better with the southern pattern, even going beyond this pattern. This is probably largely because of the traditional inheritance patterns and social structures which differentiate Mediterranean (Southern) Europe from that of Eastern and South-eastern Europe. The former is focused on conjugal ideology, whereas the latter regions were dominated by agnatic ideology, and thus the inheritance systems were focused on the patrilineal group.

Nevertheless, patrilineage essentially was considered not only as an ideological unit, but also as containing elements of the corporate group (Halpern et al. 1996: 434–435). As empirically testified, “[l]ineage groups are conceived of as segmented in structure and corporate in function” (Smith 1956:39). In societies where the lineage represents the corporate group, the legal and political rights of all family members in relation to the outside family are equally represented (Fortes 1953:26). Backer, who conducted field research in Isniq in the 1970s defined the corporate family type in Kosovo as a management unit dealing “with the household as a running concern;” where only men were considered full members. Legal rights and duties in relation to the estate and property were defined in terms of kinship affinity (Backer 2003:115). Women were not considered part of the corporate group, and consequently, they had no property rights; even at this point in time, there are very few cases of them having rights to property. Such practices and norms are still partly evident. Despite the existence of modern state laws, customary law is still a fundamental social fact interfering with state laws. People in Kosovo still preserve their traditional social organization, particularly in rural areas. While, during socialism, progress was apparent in terms of economic, educational and social life – as a way of somehow affecting the weakening of existing patriarchal relations<sup>2</sup> – the expulsion of Kosovo Albanians from public/state institutions in the 1990s marked a significant regression.

### ***The culture of relatedness***

Family and kinship have long been central to field studies in the social sciences and humanities during the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The culture of relatedness is central in both: 1) in terms of the regulation of behaviour and social norms; and 2) the structure and formation of social groups. Cultures and societies differ, *inter alia*, in terms of how their cultural, legal, economic and other social forces are

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<sup>2</sup> As Kaser (2008:145) states, the respective communist regimes, after having taken over power, passed laws that guaranteed gender equality. The Balkan socialist regimes assumed that emancipation predominantly consisted in the participation of women in the labour market. Consequently, “employment was supposed to liberate women from forced marriage and a dependency on men”.

structured, and the ways in which kinship relations are reckoned and traced. On this view, relationships between persons linked through descent are consanguinal (blood), and those linked through marriage are affinal (Stone 1997:5). Nevertheless, Stone points out that:

“Kinship involves much more, however, than relations through descent and marriage, social structure, and rights and obligations between kin. Indeed, kinship is also an ideology of human relationships; it involves cultural ideas about how humans are created, and the nature and meaning of their biological and moral connections with others” (Stone 1997:6).

Kosovo Albanians use the terms *fis* (wide segmentary lineage) and *farefis* (close lineage) to express paternal kinship relations. Referring to Backer’s definition, the *fis* is

“a group of related households tracing descent in the male line [unilineal] from a common ancestor... or because of this wide variety in usage of the term *fis*, it can only be translated as a ‘patrilineal descent group’ or shortened to ‘agnatic kin’” (Backer 2003:143–144).

A similar definition is offered by Ulqini, who makes the point that the popular concept of the term *fis* refers to the origin of a certain group of people from a male ancestor regardless of the distance between him and the descendants (Ulqini 2003:34). Common to these definitions is the notion that kinship relations are created exclusively by a male descent line, not by marriage. This, however, is not a phenomenon specific to the Albanian population; it was widespread in the Balkans and in Europe, east of the Hajnal line (see Kaser 2000). In the evidence provided in the scholarly literature, we sometimes find the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal societies’, and according to the *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Bernard and Spencer 2002:934), the tribe is more a political unit and it is larger than a clan. Using the term ‘tribal’

“is less politically correct in some quarters, but it is accepted by evolutionists [...] in discussions of a level of political development which lies between band societies and chiefly ones. The use of ‘tribal’ to refer to aspects of culture other than politics is generally

discouraged in contemporary anthropology [...]” (Bernard and Spencer 2002:934).

Aside from consanguinal (blood) ties, kinship also concerns relationships established through marriage (affinal). The traditional Albanian (and generally the Balkan) family is characterized by a household cycle consisting of multiple and nuclear family constellations, with only the patriline constituting kinship relations. For Reineck, in the context of Opoja in the south of Kosovo, people see their social world as a patrilineal one in which name, property and blood are passed on through males along the father’s line. In the view of Albanians,

“blood comes from the father, and like most patrilineal groups, Albanians acknowledge important affective ties to maternal relatives and they feel matrilineal ties in important ways, especially in the individual’s relationship to his or her maternal kin” (Reineck 1991:46–49).

Kin/village exogamy is practiced. Since marriage is exogamous, according to customary law, exogamy includes not only blood and “milk” relatives, but also spiritual relationships.

Within the family, the most frequent and most important relation has been the father-son relation, characteristic of a traditional patriarchally structured household. The other relations, such as father-daughter and brother-sister, do not have any real significance because in terms of patriarchal residence rules the daughter is expected to marry out (Kaser 1994b:3). However, the household structure has lately lost its complexity, and such a transformation of course influences the relationships between family members. Recently, father-son relations specifically seem not to be the most significant ones, as spousal relations are important, too. Yet, the place of frequent contacts and visits to the mother’s relatives that previously existed, recently seem to be in ‘competition’ with the affinal (wife’s relatives) relationships – as these latter ones seem to be stronger than the former ones. This practice shows that certain kinds of bilateral relationships have emerged. These shifts in relationships should be seen in relation to many social and political changes occurring within Kosovo society. These

transformations, of course, have also impacted on family relations and household composition. Relationships between family members are no longer strictly gendered. The most significant place is the living room. Compared to the past when men and women used separate living rooms, they now utilize the same common place. The use of a common living room makes the relations more open, and simplifies communication and contact between family members, both in terms of gender and generation. Unlike the father-son relations that existed in the past, relationships between husband and wife have recently become stronger as well. Women's contacts and visits to their natal families are more frequent than in the past, as previously, they usually went twice (rarely three times) a year.

***Beyond blood kin: friendship and other forms of social relatedness***

In addition to relationships traced through descent, other non-blood ties have played a particular role in the social structure of Albanians. In these relationships, it is important to understand what constitutes friendship. How do Albanians differentiate the role and meaning of kinship and friendship with the relations linked through spiritual relationships – *kumbarë* or *nun* (godfather), and godparenthood through baptism? What about social “kin” or social relationships? In terms of connectedness and their contacts, what was the level of frequency of interactions with one another? The traditional role and importance of *mik* (pl. *miq*) (friend, guest) – male and *mike* or *mikeshë* (pl. *miksha*) – female, even a random guest, have a special meaning, as in the cases of family visits, ceremonies, and even in the case of quarrels, fights and/or blood revenge. Such rules and norms have been established according to customary law and the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* (The Code of Lekë Dukagjini) and still take place to some extent. In the case of Isniq, Backer suggested that:

“There are traditionally very detailed rules about how guests should be treated: the kind of greeting to give them, the kinds of food to serve them, and the obligation to protect them [...] Even an enemy has the full right of protection by his host. Families in feud enjoy exemption from the threat once they are seated in each other's houses” (Backer 2003:210).



There were also certain norms that determined the place where *mik* (definite article – *miku*) is seated. He usually sits ahead of the fireplace (*në ballë të oxhakut*), on the right side of the *oda*<sup>3</sup> (a room where men sit and talk to each other). On this side the other *miq* also sit, including on the left side, too. The seating arrangement was/is done according to age, social status and the significance of friends and relatives. But who in fact was called a friend? *Mik* and *mysafir* (guest), in terms of importance and hospitality are used in practice as interchangeable categories: not only because a *mik* is simultaneously a guest, but also because the guest could be everyone – even an unknown visitor (without any previous relationship). As the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* is characterized by the omnipresence of norms and rules, it even defines such norms as the kind of foods a family should offer to a *mik*. The *Kanun*... identifies three categories of *miq*: 1) “*Per çdo mik duhet buka si han vetë*” [every guest must be given the food eaten in the house]; 2) “*Per mik të mirë duhet kafja, rakia e buka e shtrume me ndo’i send mâ teper*” [a special guest must be offered a coffee, *raki*, and food in addition to that eaten ordinarily]; 3) “*Per mik zemret duhet duhâni, kafja e ambel, rakija e bukë e mish*” [a cherished guest must be given tobacco, sweet coffee, *raki*, and bread and meat. – “*Mikut të zëmres i lshohet shpija*” [a cherished guest is given the freedom of the house] (Gjeçovi 1989: XCVI, 131–132).

In terms of these groups, the question remains of who might be entitled to be a *mik*? All non-kin (blood) relatives are called *miq*. Such connectedness is, usually, established through marriages between various kin groups. For instance, in the case of relationships established by marriage, both families call each other *miq*. The father of a married daughter refers to the in-laws of her daughter as *miq* and vice versa, and only the groom is called by a different name: *dhëndër* (literally, groom or son-in-law). *Mik* corresponds somewhat to *shok* (male) (pl. *shokë*) and *shoqe* (female) (pl. *shoqet*), which practically denotes a close friend. Furthermore, the people in Isniq, especially the elderly, sometimes refer to the kin (blood) relatives,

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<sup>3</sup> The *kulla* (a traditional fortified tower house) as well as the *oda* constituted the central institutions of traditional culture for Kosovar Albanians. These were the places, where important political, social, and cultural events took place. Additionally, they played an educational role in the 1990s, when Albanians were expelled from public schools; *oda* and *kulla* were also used as classrooms.

as *shokët tanë* (literal translation: *our friends*, but the very meaning is *kin relatives by blood*). As this term was commonly used in communism, albeit in another sense – every party member or employee called one another *shok* and *shoqe* (*comrade*, which coincidentally in Albanian corresponds to *male/female friend*), it now appears to be unpreferable, and people try to avoid using these terms.

### ***Kinship and social structure***

In terms of residential areas, Isniq's *mahallas* (neighbourhoods) and almost the most of villages in Kosovo seem to be a combination of a 'localized descent group' and a 'dispersed descent group'. Even if the *mahallas* are composed of one *bark* (spatially), or are mixed by families of other *mahalla(s)* or *bark* (*barqe*), their relationships are principally defined in terms of their descent. In a sense, it can be said that descent and residence group represent the same category. This is due to patrilineality and patrilocality. In other words, domestic units and *mahallas* are traced through blood relatives. Albanian families are patrilineally structured and composed by patrilocal residence rules. A very significant category of kinship is the *bark*, which Backer (2003) classified as a minor lineage. *Bark* (pl. *barqe*) is traced through descent, and to some extent is interchangeable with *mahalla* and *vllazni* (brotherhood). As regards the definition and the functions and social role of the *bark*, Backer (2003) stated that:

“This group of the closest agnatic relatives is usually referred to as *vllazniet*<sup>4</sup> (brotherhood), and is associated with closeness and assistance. It overlaps with the minor lineage in most cases, and the terms *bark* and *vllaznie* denote aspects of this social category. On the other hand, if numerous, the minor lineage may also be called a *mahallë* or *lagje* [neighbourhood]. The *vllazniet* will in that case consist of a subdivision of the minor lineage, i.e. a minimal lineage. The *bark* term is thus reserved for contexts where there is talk about descent, whereas *vllazniet* and *mahallë* are used for groups uniting for different social obligations” (Backer 2003:191–192).

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<sup>4</sup> This should be written *vllazni* (or in the standard language *vëllazëri*). Backer, despite having learnt and being able to speak the Albanian language, however, sometimes made errors in expressing or documenting certain words.

A similar interpretation of *bark* is given by Stahl, which might be partly appropriate in Isnqi's case as he points out:

“The name ‘*bark*’—belly—also indicates the descendants of a single ancestor; the name seems to have had various meanings concerning the number of people that it designates. In fact, the word can refer to an entire phratry, or an entire tribe since they also descend from one ancestor; but the word also refers to the male members of a domestic group who descend from a brother of the first generation, the descendants of each brother constituting a bark” (Stahl 1986:126).

The definition given by Backer, comprehensively, fits very closely to the special structure of the village of Isnqi. Backer further analyzed the gatherings of this minor lineage (*bark*) in terms of religious feasts, weddings and social occasions. The extent to which this lineage continues remains for me an unexplained problem: during my field research I tried to understand and find an explanation for it. Backer mentioned the extent of *bark*, but it is still unclear, and it is interchangeable with *vllazni* (brotherhood) and with *mahalla*, as well as having, to some extent, an association with cousinship (*kushëri*).

Based on my field experience and the definitions given by Backer (2003), Stahl (1986) and Ulqini (2003), I consider *bark* to be a structural and organizational unit based on descent, whose members are supposed to know the founder of the *bark*, and remember the time when their ancestors who came from the founder of the *bark* once lived together in a household. As already mentioned, *bark*, *mahalla* and *vllazni* are to some extent interchangeable. However, I assume that the main point of difference concerns the *purity* of the *bark*. In the case of *mahalla* or a large *vllazni*, a person could become attached (al. *bashkangjitje* or *mveshje*, *mbështetje*) to another one. There were cases when a woman's husband died, and the woman returned to her natal family together with her son(s) and her son(s) later established his family within *mahalla* (of his mother's natal home). Thus, the offspring of this arrival son(s) are not considered part of *bark*. As according to customary law, the blood comes from the father. The “newcomers” (in this case the son or sons) are considered part of *mahalla*, although they have come from another *bark*. Thus, the *bark* is *purely* traced from the blood and does not recognize the new “arrivals,” just as in the case

of *mahalla* and *vllazni*, which could happen on occasion. In addition, the practice whereby a family or more families have been attached to another *mahalla* is well-known. The practice of *mbështetje* (attachment), according to Bardhoshi (2011:226–232), even occurred in the *vllazni*. Bardhoshi further suggests that in most cases, a family or families came to a new village and were attached to a *vllazni*. This occurred due to the lack of sufficient economic resources, as well as due to conflicts and blood revenge. They had to be attached to a *vllazni* or a *mahalla* in order to ensure rights for using the common property of the village (ibid.:226–232).

These social units, apart from the head of the village (*kryeplaku*, *kryetari*) and any cases of *bajraktar*,<sup>5</sup> have been the village's main forums of representation. They acted separately to the state's authorities, even until the 1990s, and somewhat silently until now. The role and the functions they have had are analyzed more broadly in the subsequent section.

## THE ROLE OF KINSHIP IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The social structure of Albanians until the first quarter of the twentieth century was basically semi-feudal and 'tribal'<sup>6</sup> (*fisnore*). Within this perspective, Elsie (2012:1) stated that "what the first foreign travellers and explorers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century encountered was a seemingly lawless tribal culture, and they were fascinated by it." There were also other elements that those travellers noticed, such as the observation "that the Highland tribes were armed to the teeth and made profuse use of their weapons. It was thus a potentially dangerous, exciting and exotic place." Nevertheless, as he points out, these *fise* were not lawless – they were ruled by customary law (ibid.:1). The 'tribal' system was not specifically an Albanian-styled characteristic alone up to the twentieth century. Mary Edith Durham (1928:13), in analyzing the social structure of the Balkan peoples at the beginning of the twentieth century, pointed out that in historic times Europe was also a welter of tribes, and then over the

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<sup>5</sup> The *Bajraktar* was the head of the *bajrak* (*bayrak*). In Albanian this means *flamur* – flag, a military unit; and sometimes it also had judicial functions.

<sup>6</sup> The term tribal is not adequate, as already mentioned, and instead I use the Albanian word *fis*.

years, the European countries evolved into the present powers. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was only the Balkans where the ‘tribal’ system still survived intact. She also noted that

“in most parts of the world, the tribe with a chieftain and a council of headmen, has existed and exists. The North Albanian tribes, when I visited them, were the last tribes in Europe to preserve autonomy” (Durham 1928:63).

In the regions of *Malësi e Madhe* (North Albania), *Plavë and Guci* (Montenegro), which were under Ottoman administration for a long time, they acted autonomously, or as a stateless society (Berishaj 2014:14). In this way, they were not integrated into Ottoman institutions, as they created their own modes of social and political organization.

In the absence of state authority, which constitutes public power, elements of public power, meaning state structures were practiced in alternative ways. In the Balkans, due to the inefficiency of the state authorities, patrilineal kin groups up until the outset of the twentieth century somehow represented the public sphere (Kaser 1999:23); in Kosovo this was up until even later, namely the end of the twentieth century. Habermas emphasizes that the public sphere is a product of democracy, and that it began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a product of the bourgeois class, occurring within bourgeois public representation – e.g. through reading in public, as well as in the salons and coffee houses (Habermas 1991). Nevertheless, as far as it could be categorized as part of a public sphere, the Balkans was/is dominated by men, from various descent groups. In areas of the Balkans under Ottoman control, the bourgeoisie class did not play any role, we might say, as it did not exist.

The system of kinship in the Balkans, according to Kaser (1999:28), was “based on direct descent through the male line splitting the Balkan societies into segments that barely had anything in common at all.” And thus, this system was dominant until the emergence of the modern Balkan states in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In this context, “there was no institution above this segmentary level that would have managed to assert itself”, and thus these segments “provided for both identity, and their own public form” (ibid.:28). A principal aspect of

a segmentary lineage was a gathering at meetings or a kind of *assembly* comprised by the tribe or lineage, commonly represented by what Kaser (1999:28) referred to as

“honourable ‘elders’, the leaders, [who met to] discuss the most pressing issues, reach and pronounce judgement upon some matter of concern or formulate declarations of war against either neighbouring tribes or the Ottoman Administration, respectively.”

Thus, these assemblies, in their traditional form, constituted the elements of the public sphere, and men were exclusively represented there. In this context, the lineage of the Isniq village and almost everywhere else in rural Kosovo is internally differentiated, as it is segmentary, and socially and solidarily interrelated.

### *The leadership structures of village*

Historically, in traditional forms of Albanian social and political organization, a village was headed by a leader (*kreu* or *kryeplaku*) of the village, the old men (*pleqësia* – elders, but this is not concerned with age, the point is rather the authority, hierarchy and their role and affinity in dealing with public or community affairs), and the heads of the *mahallas*<sup>7</sup> who were not nominated and approved by any state authority, as their mandate came from the community (Ulqini 2003:62–64; Durham 1928:63). Therefore, regarding political systems and powers, these positions were sometimes ‘unofficial,’ and when viewed in this light, were unpaid positions. In the case of Isniq, Backer analyzed the role of *pleqësia e fshatit* (village elders) whose representatives were the heads of households. Thus, they were “a group of men with experience, knowledge and the time to take care of community affairs, and to debate laws, regulations and matters of social conflict” (Backer 2003:113). Such an organizational form within a village leadership structure also exists in Kosovo at present, as the above mentioned head and council of Isniq.

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<sup>7</sup> Based on my field experience in Isniq, a *mahalla* (quarter/neighbourhood) still consists of families whose relationships are traced through descent, and it is not merely a neighbourhood in the modern sense of the word.

Under Ottoman rule, there also existed certain kinds of parallel social-administrative institutions. These structures paralleled the Ottoman administrative and state bureaucracy. Such traditional administrative structures were the main institutions within Albanian social organization up to the beginning of the twentieth century. These structures were composed of the representatives of *fise* and *bajraks*. The *bajraks* operated in the north of Albania and Kosovo. Then, during the socialist period, i.e. in Isniq, there existed two parallel ‘political’ structures. One was the traditional authority of the elders – *pleqësia* (coming from different minor lineage groups of *barqe* (sing. *bark*), and the other was the party (*partia*), which of course was the official body. As Backer pointed out, these two forums were “in constant competition with *partia* over authority and influence since the war. In the immediate post-war period the *pleqësia* dominated, but today *partia* has won the game.” Thus, the party was the unchallenged authority, and it has ‘forced’ *pleqësia* to only operate in the sphere of family matters and village customs, acting like a guard of Isniq’s “reputation vis-à-vis other villages” (Backer 2003:181). Moreover, the communist comrades were mostly younger men who did not command so much respect in the village, having gained certain positions through their membership of political organizations. As their main duties required them to connect with the municipal authorities, they made friends not only in their own village but also outside of that area, acting more “according to the general Yugoslav cultural pattern of going to cafes to meet other men. In this way they act more as individuals than on behalf of their kinship group” (ibid.:223–224). Additionally, Backer stated that in comparison with the communist members, it was an advantage having the old men as leaders, as they were mainly focused on what was really happening in Isniq, since they could not promote their careers outside of the village (ibid.:225–226).

Remi, a teacher in Isniq’s school, told me that it was a practice for the representatives of the eighteen *barqe* to meet in the centre of the village – around the lime-tree, which still has a special meaning to the people there. At such meetings, which they used to call the *kuvend* (assembly) of the village, the headmen of each *mahalla* or *bark* generally gathered. This *kuvend* dealt with issues concerning social and political organizations as well as other social, cultural, economic and everyday life demands. They took care of the functioning of the village councils and each of

these councils was liable for certain tasks. For instance, there were three councils there: *Këshilli i Pajtimit* (the reconciliation council); *Këshilli i Bjeshkës – Malit* (the mountain council) and *Këshilli i Vades – Ujitjes* (the irrigation council). These three village councils were the main forums that regulated the ordinary needs of the people. These councils used to consist of interventionist and troops who guarded over the village, who kept the village intact when disputes and blood revenge occurred (the reconciliation council); as the mountains’ “protectors” (mountain council); and monitoring the process of irrigation and guards who were responsible for progress as concerns the irrigation system (irrigation council). The reconciliation council even remains active nowadays, and their members are usually elderly men or others who are familiar with and knowledgeable about the customary laws and the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*. This council consists of a group of respected persons whose decisions – and the cases they solve – have to be adequate and acceptable to the people. In addition, it depends on the level of the brawl or conflict. In some cases, the council may incorporate more persons, i.e. cousins, relatives or friends who could positively influence the disputing persons. Isak, a long-standing member of this council noted that

“in the council we were always an odd number, but it was not as a rule that we always went by, regarding the cases, how serious the cases were [...] we had e.g. four to five persons, while in some cases there were ten of us.”

Similar to Isak’s statement, the old man Selim (aged around ninety) told us that he has been engaged in the reconciliation council since the end of the Second World War, and he stated that “up until the party [the Communist Party] left,<sup>8</sup> I was in the village council” – by which he meant the leadership council of the village. The reconciliation council “has dealt with all sorts of work: blood revenge, wounds, water canals, roads, with all the mistakes people had made, the reconciliation council has intervened.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This refers to the period after the fall of communism.

<sup>9</sup> Commonly the members of a village’s leadership structures were also part of the reconciliation council.



Based on my ethnographic experience, in rural areas, the leading village council is comprised of political parties' representatives; nevertheless, the next important group of representatives are those coming from *barqe* or *mahalla* (both traced through descent). In this context, it was visible that in the majority of cases these representatives were simultaneously the heads of households, or sometimes more recently, those whose work and/or profession related to salaried and professional jobs, respectively higher educated people. Today, the village has a *kryetar* (leader/head) and a council, which includes the representatives of political parties. The *kryetar* is sometimes called the *kryeplak* (main elder or chief elder), *prijës i katundit* (leader of the village) (see also Backer 2003:165). The leadership is engaged in everything concerning Isniq, e.g. major projects, road construction, and projects for the construction of public buildings, the water supply system and everything that relates to the overall benefit of the village. In such cases, the leadership invites representatives of each *mahalla* of Isniq to meetings. However, according to the Law on Local Self-Government, the municipality is the basic unit of local self-government in the Republic of Kosovo (Law Nr. 03/L-040, Article 4). The organs of a municipality are the municipal assembly and the mayor (Law Nr. 03/L-040, Article 10). This means that not only is the council a voluntary and an 'extra-legal' forum, but the position of the village's leader is too. This is a variety of, one might say, 'illegal work done legally.' The current law does not stipulate this position, however. This form of organization is rather a legacy from past times when villages had a (an official) leader. Furthermore, this position existed during socialism. Nevertheless, the relations between the *kryetar* and the council with the mayor and the Deçan Municipal Assembly are practically very effective. Because of this, and despite the political systems and powers that have dominated in this area, the traditional leadership structures of the village have been maintained 'untouched', and they mainly act independently of relevant state institutions.

One very interesting point is to illustrate the role of kin in doing and at the same time 'capturing' the state. At a conference in Prishtina<sup>10</sup> in May

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<sup>10</sup> The international conference "Family and Social Security in Kosovo", Prishtina, May 2-3, 2013, was organized by the University of Graz's, Center for Southeast European History and Anthropology, in collaboration with the University of Prishtina.

2013, Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers mentioned the importance of family and kin in politics, especially in *Ilegalja* (an underground movement) that operated after the Second World War up until the liberation of Kosovo in 1999. There is no literature concerning this issue available, yet based on my professional and life experience, it is a well-known fact that some of the political activists who took part in the legal and illegal movements for liberation and state-building were relatives via both consanguinal and affinal ties. Thus, kinship has played a significant role, as I mentioned, not only in the village community, but also beyond – in state institutions.

The presence of close relatives in the public sphere – both in the same sector and in the same institution – represents a kind of nepotism. This common situation has been illustrated by a caricature published in Kosovo's daily newspaper *Koha Ditore* (July 24, 2017), which shows how a network of relatives is installed in the public institutions.

In this network of relatives, the most central person is the *daja*.<sup>11</sup> In the past, in Albanian tradition, the *daja* (uncle – mother's brother) has had a very specific role towards and authority over his nephews (his sister's sons). Therefore, the role of the *daja* over others was noticed in the last war (1998-1999), as well as in the nickname of the commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës, UÇK*), whose headquarters was called *daja* – respectively *komandant daja*. Nevertheless, state capture is more or less a regional phenomenon, but unlike in other Western Balkan countries (Pešić 2007) where the state and the public are constantly being captured by political and other para-political clans, in the case of Kosovo, in addition to the structures mentioned above, kinship connections remain a widespread phenomenon.

## CONCLUSION

Kinship relations and social structures in rural Kosovo are traced through descent. Kinship relatedness and other relative-based ties have been at the forefront of social and 'political' organization. Parental or blood relationships dominate in relation to those established through marriage

<sup>11</sup> The caricature is at the link: <https://www.koha.net/karikatura/33575/karikatura-e-dites/> (2nd November 2018).

(affinal). Nevertheless, it seems that lately, father-son relations are not considered to be the most significant ones, as gendered attitudinal relations have been weakened alongside the loss of household complexity. Depending on specific historical, economic and political contexts, this kinship system has been transforming into a system based on a combination of descent and marriage during the twentieth century. This trend is still not very strong among Kosovo Albanians, because of the hostile political contexts present up until the liberation of the country from Serbian domination, but this trend will likely become stronger in the future. This means that patrilineal relations will weaken and in-law bonds will strengthen.

Traditional social structures, mainly based on kinship, also existed (or co-existed) under the Ottoman Administration, and were also active during socialism, while in the 1990s they took over the role of public/‘state’ institutions. These structures have further adjusted subject to the post-war (1999) circumstances. But now, the leading village council comprises the political party representatives. While the next important group of representatives are those coming from *barqe* or *mahalla* (as already mentioned, both of them can be traced through descent from a common ancestor). Unlike other segmentary societies, such as for instance, those analyzed by Fortes, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Smith and other scholars, where the social organization of these societies has also been to some extent the ‘official’ (state like) one, in the case of Kosovo, segmentation itself has been determined in terms of internal organization within the village, whereas in relation to the state, it has played a parallel function.

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Tahir Latifi

## KULTURA RODBINSKIH VEZA NA KOSOVU: ULOGA SRODSTVA U PRIVATNOJ I JAVNOJ SFERI

U društvima poput Kosova, gdje se upravne i državne vlasti ne pridržavaju u potpunosti pravila ponašanja, taj jaz donekle ispunjavaju rodbinske i društvene mreže. Na Balkanu, zbog neučinkovitosti državnih vlasti, patrilinarnе rodbinske skupine sve do početka 20. stoljeća na neki način predstavljaju javnu sferu (Kaser 1999:23); u slučaju Kosova, to traje

i dalje, naime do kraja 20. stoljeća. Ovisno o konkretnom povijesnom, gospodarskom i političkom kontekstu, sustav srodstva prerastao je u sustav koji se temelji na kombinaciji podrijetla i sklapanja braka tijekom cijeloga 20. stoljeća. Baveći se pitanjem onoga što Habermas definira javnom sferom – sfera privatnih osoba koje zajednički tvore javno, to jest „ne obnašaju javne dužnosti niti su na službenom položaju“ (Habermas 1991) – u ovom se istraživanju namjerava analizirati međusobno zamjenjive položaje i uloge koje srodstvo ima u odnosu na privatnu i javnu domenu, tj. ulogu koje srodstvo ima u smislu obiteljskih veza, društvene organizacije i političkog sustava. Istraživanje se temelji na etnografskim podacima prikupljenima u razdoblju od 2011. do 2015. godine u Isniq (selu koje se nalazi u zapadnom dijelu Kosova).

**Ključne riječi:** srodstvo, obitelj, sklapanje braka, podrijetlo, javna sfera, privatna sfera, društvene mreže

## KULTURA E AFRISË NË KOSOVË: ROLI I FAREFISNISË NË SFERËN PRIVATE DHE PUBLIKE

Në shoqëritë si Kosova, ku autoritetet shtetërore dhe pushteti dështojnë të shtrijnë autoritetin e tyre dhe të kujdesën për qytetarët, farefisnia dhe lidhjet shoqërore janë ato që deri diku plotësojnë këtë zbrazëti. Në Ballkan, për shkak të mungesës së kontrollit dhe pushtetit të autoriteteve shtetërore, deri në fillim të shekullit XX grupet e farefisnisë, në linjë patrilineare, në një farë mënyre kanë përfaqësuar sferën publike; në rastin e Kosovës kjo ka vazhduar madje edhe më vonë, domethënë deri në fundin e shekullit XX. Varësisht nga kontekstet specifike historike, ekonomike dhe politike, përgjatë shekullit XX, sistemi farefisnor është kthyer në një kombinim të lidhjes së prejardhjes dhe të martesës. Në trajtimin e çështjes në aspektin se si Habermas e identifikon si sferë publike – si një sferë e njerëzve privat të cilët së bashku formojnë një publik, në kuptimin që ata njerëz të cilët nuk mbanin pozita publike/zyrtare, hulumtimi im ka për qëllim të analizojë rolet dhe pozicionet e këmbësorëve që farefisnia i ka në raport me sferën private dhe publike – domethënë roli që e ka farefisnia për sa i përket marrëdhënieve familjare, organizimit social dhe sistemit politik. Ky hulumtim është i bazuar në të dhënat etnografike të mbledhura gjatë viteve 2011-2015 në Isniq (një fshat në perëndim të Kosovës).

**Fjalët kyçe:** Farefisnia, familja, martesë, prejardhja, sfera publike, sfera private, lidhjet shoqërore



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