

# Revenge and Coming to Terms with the Past in Post-War Kosovo

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Revenge may be thought of as a thick and extended chain that binds people inexorably together. This enforced connection also exists in Kosovo, the smallest country in the Balkans. Kosovo is bordered by Montenegro to the northwest, Serbia to the north and east, North Macedonia to the south, and Albania to the west. As a form of justice, the motive of revenge links Kosovo to most of its neighbours, especially to Serbia and Albania. In the case of the former, the reason for this link is a yearning for vengeance over past violent deeds, and in the latter, the shared tradition of blood revenge as part of a social codification called the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini* connects them culturally.<sup>2</sup> Topographically, Albania and Kosovo are connected by a shared border. In 1912, Albania was able to gain independence and has been a neutral state in the Balkans since then. Kosovo, in contrast, suffered oppression, first by the Ottomans and later by Serbia. The culmination of this oppression was the Kosovo War of 1998, a conflict which had been simmering since the early 1990s. The war ended with the intervention of NATO, causing Serbia to yield and withdraw its military forces from Kosovo in 1999.

Today, nearly two decades after the end of the Kosovo War, the processes of reconciliation and commemoration remain problematic. Post-war Kosovo has been engaged in the process of coming to terms with the past as it simultaneously attempts to establish itself as a new nation. However, Kosovo also faces particular

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2 The Kanun was originally formulated by the Albanian nobleman Lekë Dukagjini (1410–1481) (see Tarifa 3). However, the actual author of the written version of the customary laws is accredited to Shtjefën Konstantin Gjeçov. After his death, work on the written Kanun remained incomplete. Nonetheless, the Kanun was published under his name in 1933 by Franciscans who used Gjeçov's notes and manuscripts to complete the customary law (see Fox xvii).

challenges. It is characterised by a profoundly ingrained ‘revenge culture’ that is the result of the customary law of the blood feud codified in the *Kanun*, a set of customary laws originating in Albania.<sup>3</sup> Although the Kanun has its roots in Albania, the code was later increasingly accepted and came to serve as common law not only in the entire region of northern Albania but also in Kosovo and Montenegro (see Tarifa 4). Some may argue that this ancient tradition is a problem of the past and no longer the norm for a Kosovar society that is striving for modernity and aims to join the European Union. Yet, the laws of the Kanun are still respected when it comes to murder and its settlement.

Kosovan blood feuds arise within the context of the Kanun’s law, which stipulates that “Blood is Paid for with Blood” (Gjeçov 172) under section CXXVI, book X, article §917. This article states that “blood is never unavenged” (174). The laws regarding the procedure after a killing are described in book 10, “The Law Regarding Crimes,” in several chapters that regulate the procedures necessary to be followed after a revenge killing (see Gjeçov 170). The widespread custom raises broader questions about the capacity of Kosovars to establish a peaceful society with modern, democratic, and judicial institutions. This would include the endeavour to forge a path to peace with its neighbour Serbia. Thus, the question is whether the ingrained custom of revenge, which regulates private disputes, has become an impulse that has negative effects on Kosovar society at large with consequences for its process of coming to terms with the past. So, we might enquire into how Kosovars mourn, how they commemorate their dead, how they come to terms with what they have done and what has been done to them, and lastly, whether they seek forgiveness or retribution.

By analysing the particular challenge that Kosovo faces in its process of remembering and healing, I will shed light on the implications of customary blood revenge – habitual remembering, intergenerational storytelling, honour, masculinity, and the ostracization of women in commemorative practices. These aspects, which have been imposed by the Kanun and its customary practice of blood revenge, are noticeable in Kosovo’s present-day commemoration process. Therefore, they are worthy of close scrutiny because they tap into the overarching

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3 The Kanun represents a series of norms, values, and injunctions that were passed down orally for generations. It entails 1,263 articles and its customary laws are subdivided into twelve books: church, family, marriage, house, work, transfer of property, spoken word, honour, damages, the law regarding crimes, the Kanun of the elderly, and exemptions and exceptions (see Tarifa 11).

question of what kind of work memory culture should do. The aspect of habitual remembering is evident in the habit of Kosovars to remember their conflictual past with Serbia. The implication of generational transfer enables Kosovars to pass on memories of this conflictual past to the next generations, thus, continuing to perpetuate divisions between Kosovars and Serbs. Further, the concept of honour, which is the most important principle of the Kanun, is expressed in present-day commemorative practices while being predominantly associated with masculinity. This, however, results in the ostracization of women from Kosovo's dominant commemorative landscape.

This essay will present these implications of customary blood revenge as part of Kosovo's collective memory with reference to the novel *Broken April* (1978) by Ismail Kadare. Although published in 1978, the novel is considered to be a monumental work of fiction in Albanian literature because it accurately represents the repercussions of the Kanun's customary blood revenge on the Albanian people. Hence, it serves here as the primary example which illustrates the above-mentioned implications of customary blood revenge. Against the backdrop of Kosovo's recent history, I will further tackle the repercussions of customary revenge for present commemorative practices, specifically, the *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex* (2013) and the art installation *Thinking of You* (2015) by the British-Albanian conceptual artist Alketa Xhafa Mripa. As commemorative practices which arose from the recent war, these memorials represent attempts of coming to terms with the past while simultaneously embodying the pitfalls and challenges of contemporary memory work. Finally, this essay will examine the role of revenge culture in fostering peaceful relations with Serbia. In this process, forgetting is less than ideal when coping with a violent past; so, it would seem more desirable to pursue processes of forgiveness and cooperation to unite Kosovars and Serbs.

## KOSOVO'S CONFLICTUAL PAST

The name of the country *Kosovo* is familiar to many, since it often appears in the global media, especially during the first decade of the new millennium. However, the "tiny place with a tiny population" (Judah xiii), in the middle of the Balkans, is not of much significance to most people. Yet, the country does matter politically because it is part of Europe's 'backyard,' and it was the reason NATO fought its first

war (see Judah xiii). Since then, Kosovo has become the site of international friction between European, U.S., and Russian leaders (see Judah xiii).

As Denis MacShane emphasises, “Kosovans are steeped in history” (16). It is thus worth sketching its history in order to comprehend the politics regarding the extensive conflict with Serbia. But beyond that, an understanding of Kosovo’s history is vital to properly apprehend the power of customary blood revenge in contemporary commemoration practises. The word *Kosovo* derives from a Serbian word, *Kos*, meaning ‘blackbird,’ which became the name of the centre of the medieval Serbian empire (see Judah 31). Serbia lost Kosovo to the Ottoman Empire that ruled the territory from the mid-fifteenth to the early twentieth century, while Islam spread among the Albanian-speaking population (see Allcock, Young, and Lampe 2019). In the early twentieth century, Kosovo was incorporated into Serbia and remained a Serbian province until the end of the century. Throughout this time, Kosovo was part of the former Yugoslavia which comprised Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Croatia (see Judah xvii). In the early 1990s, however, Yugoslavia began to collapse and consequently, war overtook the region, forcing hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee northward. During this period, all former Yugoslav nations gained independence, except Kosovo which remained a province of Serbia.

During the late 1990s, Kosovars became increasingly frustrated with Serbia’s continuing repression and the failure of the eight-year-long campaign of passive resistance led by their President Ibrahim Rugova (see Malcolm xxvii). Consequently, confrontations between Kosovo-Albanian and Serb forces arose in 1997, while Serb law enforcements had to retreat after they met with armed resistance by Kosovars. During a later confrontation in 1998, Serb forces responded aggressively to an armed revolt led by Kosovars. This response stimulated the growth of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) which served as the reason for Serb militaries to attack Kosovar villages in the summer of 1998 and execute a campaign that aimed to free the territory of Kosovars (see Malcolm xxvii–xxviii). The conflict in Kosovo forced around 850,000 people to flee the territory in response to ethnic cleansing (see Judah xvii). Noel Malcolm argues that Serbian troops had been instructed to solve the ‘Kosovo problem’ with a campaign, which was a “coordinated operation of ‘ethnic cleansing’” (Malcolm xxxvi–xxxviii). In Malcolm’s view, Kosovars were forced to leave the region and never come back because this campaign did not have a military purpose but a demographic one (see xxxvi).

Additionally, to Malcolm's view, it can be added that the campaign was also a political strategy because it brought about the change of political outcomes. The goal was to permanently uproot a significant proportion of the rural population of Kosovo (see Malcolm xxxii). In early 1999, this campaign continued to be executed by the Serb military, while Western governments attempted to stop the president of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, and proposed granting Kosovo autonomy. However, Milošević refused and what began as an uprising led by Kosovars, escalated into an international crisis which concluded in an air bombardment by NATO in 1999 on the remaining Yugoslav states, Serbia and Montenegro (see xxviii).

After the NATO intervention, Kosovo steadily developed the structures of an independent country under the supervision of the UN, and on 17 February 2008, it declared independence from Serbia, thus becoming the "world's newest and most controversial of states" (Judah xiii). The declaration of Kosovo's independence raised the hopes of many Albanians because it seemed to point to the end of the conflict. Unfortunately, this was not the case as Kosovo remained a region in conflict (see Judah xvii). The declaration of Kosovo's independence has been a traumatic experience for many Serbs. Kosovo is perceived as "the cradle of Serbs" (Malcolm 41) and their 'Jerusalem' (see Malcolm xxxi). For many Serbs, it is still considered a definite part of Serbia. Kosovo-Albanians, on the other hand, argue that independence is their right and an amending of the wrongs inflicted by Serbia (see Judah viii–xix). By grasping Kosovo's history and more specifically its violent past with Serbia, it becomes much more transparent how customary blood revenge might affect Kosovo's recent memory work and why the questions posed in the introduction are worth pursuing.

## THE YEARNING FOR REVENGE

As Karl Marx argues, the traditions of the dead generations weigh like nightmares on the minds of the living (see 5). For ethnic Albanians, this statement holds true within the ever-present custom of blood vengeance. A recent article on *BBC News* gave evidence to that view by reporting that 68 families in Northern Albania are currently involved in blood feuds (see Hosken & Kasapi 2017). As early as the 1990s, Anton Çetta, a Kosovar academic, along with other activists and intellectuals, led an 'anti-vendetta' campaign in the form of a reconciliation committee that sought

to bring blood feuds between Kosovar families to an end. The goal of this campaign was to solve and pacify the many blood feuds that were damaging Kosovo's society (see Elsie 3). The committee was successful appeasing more than 900 feuds (see 3).

The practice of blood revenge did decline throughout the political instability after the 1998–99 conflict because Kosovars were motivated to fight against the Serbs (see Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2009). After the war, however, blood feuds re-emerged. Particularly allegations of collaboration with Serbs triggered more blood feuds which were targeted at Kosovars (see Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2009). Although the desire for revenge is an innate human instinct, for Kosovars, this longing has been intensely reinforced by the laws of the Kanun. Given its codification, revenge might be thought of as a cultural principle for Kosovars, especially if oppression, aggression, or violence have been experienced in the past. Therefore, the laws regarding blood feuds seem to reinforce the yearning to take revenge, which is not necessarily aimed at fellow Kosovars but towards the Serb minority living in Kosovo.

Indeed, foreign policymakers in Kosovo underrated the desire for revenge amongst the Kosovars who returned home at the end of the war (see Judah 286). The Kosovar journalist Veton Surroi highlights this point, addressing vengeance and violence toward Serbs in his work. He states that the returning Kosovars were not sympathetic towards Serbs as he appeals to Kosovars to take responsibility for the crimes committed against the Serbian population after NATO forces assumed control (see MacShane 57). Surroi pleads for understanding, asserting that he and his fellow citizen should reflect on the fact that they were in the same position a few months earlier. He argues that although Serbs were responsible for disturbing atrocities during the war, this is not a justification for taking revenge (see Surroi in MacShane 57).

Marx's assertion about the weight of the past on the living is just as true for the main character Gjorg Berisha in Ismail Kadare's *Broken April* (1978), a novel which deals with the custom of blood revenge reinforced by the Kanun. Kadare's novel is set in Northern Albania in the 1930s during the reign of King Zogu I. At that time, Albania was an inaccessible country where people relied on customary law rather than state authorities. However, the novel was written in the 1970s, under the regime of the Communist Enver Hoxha, a brutal dictator, who exerted absolute control over his small country from 1945 to 1985 (see Morgan 8). Throughout the Hoxha regime, the Kanun was prohibited, but the fact that Kadare

invoked the theme of the Kanun when it was strictly outlawed testifies to its firm place in the collective memory of Albanians. So, *Broken April* serves here as an example of the prevalence of the Kanun and its revenge culture in the collective memory of Albanians and Kosovars.

The Kanun is at the centre of the novel because no moment in the storyline is not concerned with the legal system of the customary law. *Broken April* tells the story of the 26-year-old Gjorg Berisha who lives on the high plateau in the northern highlands of Albania where the Kanun is the functioning law. Under these laws, the protagonist Gjorg, is forced to commit a murder in retaliation for the death of his brother. Because of this vengeful act, a member of the opposing family will kill him in turn. This cycle of revenge between the Berisha and Kryeqyqe families began 70 years earlier when the Kryeqyqe family granted shelter to a passing traveller. A man from Gjorg's family killed the traveller, and this violated the hospitality that the Kryeqyqe family had extended to the stranger. Obligated by the laws of the Kanun, which hold hospitality towards guests as the highest virtue, the Kryeqyqes were bound to avenge his death, and thus began the generations-long blood feud between the two families. After Gjorg avenges the death of his brother, his life is regulated by the customary law more profoundly than ever. The Kanun grants him a thirty-day truce, called *bessa*,<sup>4</sup> during which he has to take a journey to pay the blood tax to the feudal blood steward. Soon the day arrives when his truce is at an end, and he has to hide. Shortly after that, a Kryeqyqe man discovers him in his hiding place and kills Gjorg according to the rules of the Kanun.

In *Broken April*, Kadare does not merely investigate the law of the blood feud and the custom of blood vengeance but rather the repercussions of the past on the present. Therefore, not only the act of blood vengeance should be considered, but also the effect of the custom on the yearning of ethnic Albanians to take revenge against potential perpetrators. Given this backdrop, one might ask how the narrative portrays implications of the customary law of the blood feud on large-scale processes of coping with the past, such as commemoration and reconciliation. These processes are of prime importance for societies with a conflictual history. According to the British historian Timothy Garton Ash, the notion of coming to terms with the past derives from the two German words *Geschichtsaufarbeitung*

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4 The Albanian word 'bessa' has several meanings, e.g. as a word of honour, faith, trust, protection, and truce (see Camaj xiv).

and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which denote “‘dealing with the past,’ ‘treating the past,’ ‘working over the past’ and, in the latter case, even ‘overcoming the past’” (Ash quoted in Dragović-Solo 33–34). These terms are frequently used interchangeably to refer to processes of remembrance and the construction of public awareness about a traumatic past, including official discourse and public memory. The process of ‘coming to terms with the past’ occurs after terror, repression, or conflict within a state that is marked by profound human rights violations (see Dragović-Solo 34). In light of the process of coping with a violent past and for the sake of not repeating it, it is necessary to examine the structures in which a particular collective memory shapes society.

## HABITUAL REMEMBERING AND STORYTELLING

The custom of blood vengeance can be considered as more than just a cultural tradition. It is a monument of Albanian culture and thus a part of Albanian and Kosovar collective memory. As the character Bessian emphasises in *Broken April*, the section devoted to the law of the blood feud “is one of the most monumental constitutions that have come into being in the world, and we Albanians ought to be proud of having begotten it” (Kadare 72). As such, the Kanun and its customary law of the blood feud impose the practice of habitual remembering on Kosovars.

The novel *Broken April* is filled with acts of remembrance. At the beginning of the novel, Gjorg has to remember several steps before and after he kills the male member of the Kryeqyqe family who has to be murdered in turn. As his victim is in near sight, “in keeping up with the custom, he warned the man before he fired” (Kadare 9). After the man is shot, he reminds himself that according to the rules of the Kanun, he has to turn him on his back and leave the man’s rifle close to his head (see Kadare 10). This habitual remembering invigorates Kosovars to uphold the laws of the Kanun and their exact rules. Beyond that, the law of the blood feud reinforces memorization in relation to conflict. The Kanun forces families who are embroiled in blood feuds to remember what was done to them and consequently to exact retribution. In *Broken April*, Gjorg is repeatedly reminded of his dead brother by the hanging shirt on the upper storey of his family’s *Kulla*, a traditional tower-house. The Kanun requires the blood-soaked shirt of the killed family member to be hung up until the blood of the owner has been avenged (see Kadare 22). People



believe that once the bloodstains turn into a yellow colour “the dead man cries out for vengeance” (45).

According to Andreas Huyssen, a society’s collective memory is exchanged in its beliefs, values, rituals, and institutions which are shaped by reconstruction (see 249). In keeping with this observation, the hanging shirt serves as an indicator which suggests that the time for revenge has come (see Kadare 22). The fact that the grieving families are *required* to hang the blood-soaked shirt as a reminder of revenge can be associated with the constructiveness of collective memory in the present. This notion has been introduced by Maurice Halbwachs, who stresses that collective memory is reconstructed in the present, while its notions, customs and traditions are borrowed from the past (see Halbwachs 22).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the distinct act of hanging up the shirt becomes a *dynamic* site that creates a reminder for revenge. Moreover, it transforms a simple shirt into a memorial with tragic repercussions for Gjorg who is repeatedly haunted by the image of the hanging shirt (see Kadare 111). This tradition constructs Gjorg’s present by carrying the past, as a haunting memory, into the present until it is time to take vengeance.

This habit of remembering is also embedded in the *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex* (2013) in Prekaz, a municipality in the city of Skenderaj in Kosovo. The site commemorates the Attack of Prekaz on 5 March 1998 by Serbian forces. In this attack, Adem Jashari, who was the founder of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and the fifty-six members of his extended family, including women, children and the elderly, were killed under gunfire between March 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> in 1998 (see Krasniqi 2). The complex, which is a state-sponsored memorial, comprises three components, the family residence (see Appendix image 1), the graveyard (see Appendix image 2) and the museum (see Appendix image 3). For this memorial, the whole Kosovar society plays a crucial role in its effectiveness. As Halbwachs stresses, the role of society in collective memory is decisive because memories are obtained, remembered, identified, and localised in society (see Halbwachs 38). His theory is fundamental for understanding the role of society when it comes to the collective memory of Kosovars, given the fact that it is because of society that the custom of blood vengeance has persisted. This is also the case for the Memorial

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5 Maurice Halbwachs is considered to be the founding father of the sociology of collective memory. He published influential texts in which he pioneered the term ‘collective memory’ and developed his concept of *collective mémoire* in the 1920s. Especially his works *On Collective Memory* (1925) and *The Collective Memory* (1950) were of prime importance for the concept.

Complex since it represents the memory of Kosovars and generates a collectively shared past. Consequently, the hoisted flags in front of the family residence symbolise the value of suffering and dying for one's nation. The minimalist graveyard, which is safeguarded by members of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF), represents the authority of the Jashari family within Kosovar society. Lastly, the museum suggests that remembering the attack merely through the house and the graveyard is not sufficient. Thus, the account and its meaning for Kosovo's history and collective memory have to be strengthened by enhancing the memory of the attack in the form of a museum.

One consequence of the Kanun's longevity is generational transfer. Concerning this, Halbwachs addresses collective memory in the family, religious communities, and social classes. According to him, family memory, for instance, is common intergenerational memory which is created through social interaction and communication (see Erlil 17). Consequently, memory can be shared through the repeated, usually oral, recollection of family memory (see 17). These notions of inter-generational memory offer an insight into the ability of the Kanun, and its customary practice of blood revenge, to reach an extension of longevity due to the oral transmission of the custom from generation to generation. Hence, intergenerational storytelling is crucial for the tradition of blood vengeance to persist. The oral tradition is realised in the form of myths and rituals, which transfer experience and knowledge to subsequent generations and make it thereby perpetual.

*Broken April* highlights the impossibility of breaking the cycle of revenge as each generation repeats ancient rites that are inherited from preceding generations (see Karacan 31). The customs of the Kanun can be seen as a memory of a parental past (see Karacan 30) because it is inherited memory. Indeed, Gjorg learns about the rules of blood feuds from his family, especially his father. In *Broken April*, it is Gjorg's father who demands him to do what is expected according to the Kanun, "you must go to the burial. You must also go to the funeral dinner to honour the man's soul [...] for that reason you must go" (Kadare 14–15). It is his father who reminds Gjorg repeatedly to respect family honour and thus of his duty to avenge his brother, as he recites the words of the Kanun, "two fingers-breadth of honour have been stamped on our forehead by almighty God [...] whiten or further besmirch your dirty face" (46).

In Kosovo, telling stories of ancient conflicts is not merely a human tradition, but it can be seen as an inherited tradition from the Kanun. The law of the blood feud relies on communicative storytelling for its persistence, and as collective memory, it is shaped through social interaction. This interaction occurs primarily in the transfer of family memories through intergenerational storytelling (see Ahonen 14). As Ann Rigney argues, cultural remembrance depends on an “internal dynamic” (346) which results from exchanged stories among contemporaries who witnessed the selective focus on ‘canonical’ sites which serve as points of reference across generations (see Rigney 346). This is also true about the *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex* since students are taught the story of Adem Jashari and his family at an early age through history textbooks and school visits to the Memorial Complex (see Bailey 2018).

However, intergenerational storytelling can also result in collective memory, which divides ‘us’ from the ‘other’ (see Ahonen 14). The law of the blood feud and its role in the community cause profound discord between the Berisha and Kryeqyqe families in *Broken April*. Similarly, the constantly reiterated narrative surrounding Adem Jashari reinforces divisions between Kosovars and Serbs since it serves as the dominant narrative in the process of nation-building (see Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 526). According to Anna Di Lellio and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, the Memorial Complex epitomises resistance and therefore acts as a reminder of the obligation to not forget those who helped liberate the nation from the enemy (see Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 526). Beyond that, memorials can perpetuate divisions within societies because their meaning is not necessarily about reconciliation (see Viejo-Rose 472). Consequently, the intergenerational storytelling of the Jashari account has an adverse effect on the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, since memories of the war are still circulating, the contempt towards Serbs has not dwindled.

The customary law of blood vengeance regulates the aspect of silence when it comes to taboos because it enforces the acceptance of certain events instead of questioning them. It precludes active discourse because this is interpreted as a sign of weakness. For instance, Gjorg is not allowed to question the fact that he has to kill someone because this would bring disgrace upon his family. The art installation *Thinking of You* (2015) by the artist Alketa Xhafa Mripa, in contrast, seeks to break the silence through an act of artistic retribution, namely by hanging women’s dresses inside what is perceived to be the predominantly male space of a football

stadium (see Appendix image 4). The installation was presented in 2015 in a football stadium in Pristina, Kosovo. The artist collected more than 5000 pieces of clothing to hang in the open on clotheslines and thereby represent the female victims of rape and sexual violence in the Kosovo War.

Similar to the blood-stained shirt of Gjorg's brother, the hanging dresses represent the constructiveness of a memory discourse that tends to remain unprocessed and unaddressed within the Kosovar society. According to the artist Xhafa Mripa, the goal of the installation is to break the silence around sexual violence, to negate its stigma, show solidarity with victims, and mount a call to action (see Xhafa Mripa "Art as the Catalyst"). The installation uses storytelling differently than *Broken April*. In so doing, it prefers discussion over silence concerning social taboos like sexual violence. This way, it opens new avenues for the commemoration of the war by giving victims the possibility of addressing their traumas instead of repressing them. For Kosovar society as a whole, this means that uncomfortable issues need to be dealt with instead of being usurped by nationalist discourse.

## HONOUR, MASCULINITY AND THE OSTRACIZATION OF WOMEN

The customary law of the blood feud is a patriarchal tradition because it firmly reinforces notions of honour and masculinity. The most crucial principle, not only of the entire Kanun but especially of the law regarding blood feuds, is the concept of *honour*. Either as personal honour or as family honour, it is fundamental for the principles of the Kanun (see Malcolm 18) and the supreme moral value among Albanian families (see Tarifa 8). This supreme moral value is emphasised, for example, by writer Edith Durham when she poses the (rhetorical) question in *High Albania* (1909),<sup>6</sup> "what profit is life to a man if his honour be not clean? To cleanse his honour no price is too great" (Durham 32). According to the Kanun, if a man's honour is offended it cannot be paid with property, but this kind of wrongdoing can only be paid for by blood (see Malcolm 18). Consequently, the spilled blood of that victim then waits for the purification by blood from his own family (see

<sup>6</sup> Edith Durham was a British travel writer and author of the popular anthropological account *High Albania* (1909) which has become a canonical text for Albanian and Kosovar anthropology.

Malcolm 20). Durham further highlights the importance of the concept of honour in the law of the blood feud when she argues that until a dishonoured man has not restored his honour, he will be regarded as an outcast who is treated with contempt by his fellows in the community “and to clean his honour, he kills” (Durham 41).

The concept of honour is crucial in the execution of blood vengeance and it appears repeatedly in *Broken April*. As Gjorg recalls the words “two fingers-breadth of honour on our forehead” (Kadare 46), he wonders why this phrase and its meaning are of such importance (see 46). Yet, he comprehends that the risk of losing his honour would be far worse than the punishments his father could impose on him (see 46). Exactng blood vengeance elevates a simple man to an *honourable* man who will be respected within the community. As Bessian explains to his wife, natural causes of death are shameful to men, and the only goal throughout their life is to receive honour which ensures him a “modest memorial on his death” (71). Further in the novel, this honourable cause of death is expressed as a wish for a new-born male child, “may he have a long life, and die by the rifle” (71).

Consequently, honour in the custom of blood revenge is principally associated with masculinity. Wherever the word honour appears, typically the word man is also mentioned. Killing by the rifle within the blood feud designates men who avenge a death as so-called ‘justicers.’ In the Kanun, “the justicers were a kind of vanguard of the clan, the one who carried out the killings, but also the first to be killed in the blood feud” (Kadare 49). Being stained by blood elevates men to unforgettable justicers, who, as Gjorg explains, are the “flower of the clan, its marrow, and its chief memorial” (49–50). He further adds that other men or events are forgotten in the life of the mountaineers but “the justicers, tiny, inextinguishable flames on the graves of the clan, were never affected from its memory” (49–50). This specific way of killing and dying for honour requires a particular form of masculinity which celebrates courage, as Gjorg’s father reminds his son, “it is up to you to be a man or not” (46).

The concept of honour is particularly apparent in the *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex*. The figure of Adem Jashari has become the avenged son of Kosovo who brought honour to the country. Kosovars perceive him as an honourable man who did not yield to Serb forces. Thus, honour generates masculinity which can be observed in the memorialisation of Adem Jashari who has become the “man of sacrifice” (Krasniqi 15). According to Vjollca Krasniqi, he is constructed as a man who sacrificed himself because he perceived his and his family’s death as a form of

martyrdom, i.e. “dying for his mission is to sacrifice himself so that others might live” (15). Hence, collective identity and collective suffering establish dying for the nation as worthwhile. As the brochure of the Memorial Complex states, the fallen blood of the Jasharis gives Prekaz where the attack took place, “the honour [of being] called the birthplace of Kosova’s freedom” (Fylli 13). The concept of honour can be considered a tradition which exerts a substantial impact on present-day commemoration. As a tradition, it has been modified into a contemporary idea within Kosovo which coexists according to the needs of the present, specifically, national independence (see Karacan 37–38).

Moreover, the rewards of the custom of blood vengeance for a man are honour, maleness, and nobility. The alternative, reconciliation, merely ushers in peace, something to which families engaged in ancient blood feuds are not accustomed. As Gjorg states, “perhaps it took years to get used to peace, just as it had taken so many years to get used to its absence. The mechanism of the blood feud was such that even as it freed you, it kept you bound to it in spirit for a long time” (Kadare 49). According to the steward of blood in *Broken April*, there is a difference between old and new blood feuds. While new feuds were easier to reconcile, old ones are hard to settle (see Kadare 144). In the same way, one can assume that in post-war Kosovo reconciliation is harder to achieve because the conflict between Serbs and Kosovars is akin to an ‘old blood feud.’ Thus, the conflict is hard to settle, while remembering the conflictual past remains easy.

Within the law of the blood feud, women are entirely precluded from the concept of honour. If they want to be considered as honourable as men, they have to become so-called ‘Sworn Virgins’ who relinquish their femininity so as to be recognised and respected as male members of the household.<sup>7</sup> In light of this traditional practice, the repercussions of the honour concept negatively affect the commemoration of female victims of sexual abuse during the war. In Kosovar society, as in many other societies, dealing with victims of rape and sexual violence is considered distasteful and therefore dishonourable. In response, the artist of *Thinking of You* wanted to launch a debate about sexual violence, an issue which is considered a taboo within Kosovar society. Beyond that, the installation highlights the fact that women’s voices tend to be ignored and that, prior to the

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7 ‘Albanian Sworn Virgins’ are unmarried women in Albania and Kosovo who assume a male role, wearing men’s clothes and doing men’s work (see de Waal 194).

*Thinking of You* installation, there was no shared discourse concerning rape in Kosovo's commemorative landscape.

Because of its ground-breaking status, the installation might be considered a 'counter-monument', a concept proposed by James E. Young. The counter-monument has surfaced as a new and critical form of commemorative practice which opposes traditional monumentality (see Young 271). The installation *Thinking of You* can be considered a counter-monument because it contests the principles of conventional memorial spaces like the *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex*. Ann Rigney praises the counter-monument for publicly remembering groups that are usually ignored or left out of standard commemorative practices (see Rigney 13), in this case, Kosovar women. In keeping with Young's notion of the counter-monument, *Thinking of You* provokes, moves, demands interaction, and then disappears again (see Young 277). It *provokes* by thematising the crime of sexual violence in the Kosovo War. It *moves* by giving the victims of rape, considered a tabooed issue, a voice. As a counter-monument, it invites individuals to actively take part in the actualisation of the installation to which hundreds of women offered their clothes and, in doing so, makes each of them "self-memorialisers [...] by inviting viewers to commemorate themselves" (Young 279). Lastly, it *disappeared* again without leaving any material mark but a mental one.

## CONCLUSION

This article analysed the interrelation between the custom of blood vengeance and commemorative practices in Kosovo. This could be observed in the repercussions of the custom for the process of coping with a conflictual past. First, it has become apparent that ethnic Albanians devote time and effort to remembering a past which is constructed for nationalist purposes. At the same time, less value is attached to forgiveness and reconciliation. Second, the process of coming to terms with the past in Kosovo is still in its early stages and more thoughtful work has to be done. At this stage, commemorative practices perpetuate a division between Kosovars and Serbs and undermine the role of women in society by ascribing heroism to nationalist fighters. Third, many Kosovars are not ready to forgive or reconcile because society places excessive emphasis on retribution. My arguments suggest that the customary law of the blood feud has a profound influence on Kosovo's

efforts to deal with its conflictual past. In this way, customary vengeance and the memory of the recent war create a vicious cycle of revenge against 'the other,' i.e. Serbs. In addition, remembering a conflictual past fosters retribution because it addresses collective memories which are imbued with conflict thus promoting further contempt towards Serbia.

The re-emergence of blood feuds after the Kosovo War points to the failure of the country to constitute a modern state characterised by peaceful coexistence with Serbia. For this goal to be accomplished, a national discourse about proper remembrance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is needed. However, the findings in the analysis above demonstrate that many Kosovars are not yet ready to forget. It needs to be stressed that reconciling with Serbia does not mean disregarding their atrocities. Coming to terms with the past and reconciliation are only possible if both sides assume responsibility for their actions. Kosovo and Serbia will need to offer justice to the victims of their crimes and come to terms with what was done to them as well as what they did to others. Serbia has not critically addressed the wrongs it committed during the Kosovo War. Rather, the belief is still widespread that Kosovo is an unrelinquishable part of Serbian culture (see Weller 277). Knowing this, it comes as no surprise that Kosovars have not critically reviewed their past either. It is incumbent on Kosovars to begin forgiving the Serbs living in northern Kosovo and for the perpetrators to take responsibility themselves (see Weller 267). For Kosovo, commemorative practices, such as the installation *Thinking of You*, which sheds light on excluded groups and addresses taboos, should be more dominant in coping with the past. National myths may be treated critically in history books, but they hold no place in commemorative acts.

This article opened with the statement that revenge was like an everlasting chain. Friedrich Nietzsche proposed a means of breaking free from these chains and attaining happiness, namely, by learning to forget. But, according to the philosopher, a man cannot learn to forget, so "he always hangs onto past things. No matter how far or how fast he runs, this chain runs with him" (306). For the sake of peace and reconciliation, a better recommendation for breaking the chain of revenge would be not to forget but to replace hatred and contempt with forgiveness and cooperation.



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## Appendix



Image 1: Family house, *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex*. 2013, Prekaz, Skenderaj.

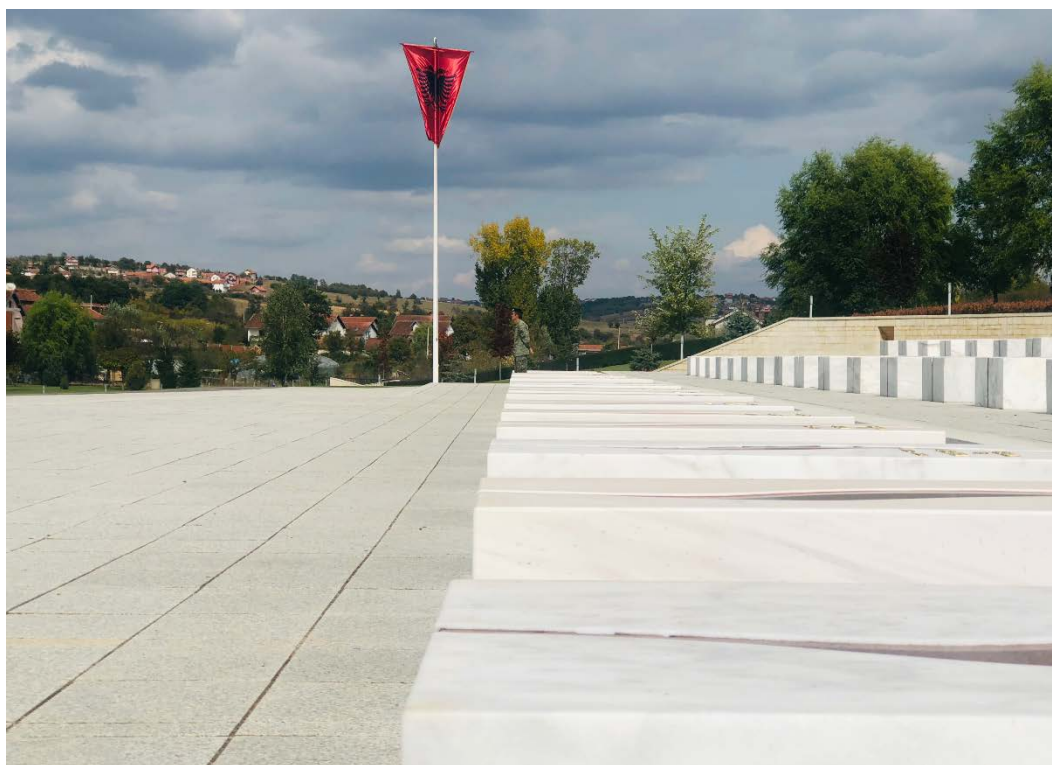


Image 2: Graveyard, *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex*. 2013, Prekaz, Skenderaj.





Image 3: Museum, *Adem Jashari Memorial Complex*. 2013, Prekaz, Skenderaj



Image 4: Xhafa Mripa, Alketa. *Thinking of You*. 2015, Pristina.

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