

## **Albania: Blood Feuds -- 'Blood For Blood'**

From <http://www.rferl.org/>

By Jolyon Naegele

In Albania, one of Europe's poorest countries, the centuries-old tradition of blood vengeance has seen a resurgence over the past decade. The law-and-order vacuum created by the collapse of communism has sent many Albanians back to the oral common laws of their tribal roots -- laws that include the right to murder to avenge an earlier killing.

Tirana, 12 October 2001 (RFE/RL) -- In a broad valley in northern Albania circled by mountains, a medieval hilltop fortress, and a NATO radar station, Ndoc Kapsari and his wife Gjovana take turns standing guard on the roof of the garage where they live. Armed with a hunting rifle, they scan the surrounding cornfields and vineyards for any sign that someone may be coming to kill them.

The Kapsaris have lived this way for 10 years. Blamed for a fatal accident that both Ndoc and police investigators say was none of his doing, he and his wife have become the permanent target of a family seeking "gjakmarrja," or blood vengeance. Forced into a life of complete isolation, Ndoc Kapsari describes himself as "the most unfortunate man in the world."

He isn't alone. There are an estimated 2,800 Albanian families living in self-imposed isolation, trying to avoid becoming victims of blood vengeance. In the years since the collapse of communism, Albania has seen law and order crumble in many parts of the country, replaced by the ancient social codes of the "kanun," the unwritten customary laws used by centuries of Albanian tribes to determine everything from standards of dress to marriage to the resolution of disputes. The renewed interest in the kanun has been especially strong in the north of the country, where Albanians maintain close ties with their extended families, clans, and tribes. But even in the capital Tirana, at least three published versions of the kanun are widely available in book kiosks.

Ismet Elezi is a professor of law in Tirana. He says the kanun may date back as far as 2,000 years to the Illyrians, widely believed to be the ancestors of today's Albanians. Today there are three main versions of the code in northern Albania -- the Kanun of Lek Dukagjini, the Kanun of Skanderbeg (named after two medieval Albanian heroes), and the Kanun of the Mountains. Passed orally from generation to generation for centuries, the kanuns were not transcribed until between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries.

Now, Elezi says, the current lack of state control and distinct laws has sent many Albanians back to the kanun and its guidelines on blood vengeance. "The kanun sanctions the principle of blood for blood, which means the murderer must be killed."

But Elezi adds that despite the kanun's sanction of blood vengeance, it is strict in its rules on how such revenge can be carried out. For example, the kanun firmly prohibits the retribution killing of women, children, and the elderly. It also limits the types of weapons that can be used, as well as the period of isolation that male relatives of a revenge killer must undergo. In the past, male family members were isolated for a week after a blood killing took place. Now, Elezi says, entire families are forced into isolation for months and even years at a time.

"Isolation was a phenomenon thought to be a manner of resolution to the extent that those involved in blood vengeance [otherwise] had no security for their lives and nowhere to

go. The problem of [blood vengeance] continues because the state structure is not working so well."

Ndoc Kapsari says the state offers him little hope of ever being rescued from the isolation he and his wife live in -- despite the fact that investigators and prosecutors three times pronounced him innocent of the death that sent him into hiding.

In 1991, Kapsari, a carpenter, was standing in line for eggs. Two young men began pushing him and trying to take his place. Kapsari stood his ground, but says that after he left the store, the two men attacked him with knives and iron bars. Kapsari describes what happened next: "The two young men fled. One of them was on a bicycle, and he crashed into an electric power pylon and died on the spot. When I saw he was dead I went straight to the police."

Kapsari was jailed during each of the three investigations into the young man's death. But after authorities pronounced him innocent for the third and final time, the dead man's family posted a \$15,000 bounty on his life, insisting he should be killed on the principle of "blood for blood." Kapsari says he likewise turned to the kanun for guidance.

"After I was released from jail, I decided to proceed according to the kanun of Lek Dukagjini. I went to church and swore before the priest that I was innocent. The father of the dead man then said he wanted to forgive me but that his wife and surviving children wouldn't let him. They said, 'As long as you're alive, we will try to kill you.'"

Kapsari and his family, then living in the town of Shkodra, were forced to remain at home day and night, year in and year out. During the wave of anarchic unrest that swept the country in 1997, Kapsari's carpentry workshop was torched and the family's apartment was destroyed. Kapsari says he fled the apartment in a hail of gunfire, flagged down a car and drove 10 kilometers south to his native hamlet of Plezha. A neighbor brought his family, and friends hastily built a garage in the middle of the Kapsaris' field, complete with a surrounding three-meter-high wall.

The Kapsaris have been there ever since. Their lifeline to the outside world is a cellular phone. They have a refrigerator, a washing machine, a stove, and a tape deck, as well as some couches and chairs, all donated by villagers emigrating to Italy. They receive newspapers and own two books -- the Bible and the kanun. Ndoc has assembled a circular saw and is able to cut timber, using carpentry work to survive.

After two attempts by the rival family to murder their son when he was just five years old, the Kapsaris have sent all three of their children to live elsewhere. Ndoc says the attacks continue: "Certainly they are out there. They come at night. They move on foot along the walls, throwing stones in our direction. Who in the hell would come at night just to make the dogs bark?"

Emin Spahia is the chairman of the All-National Albanian Reconciliation Mission, created in 1991 to help maintain a sense of order following the collapse of communist rule. He spends much of his time driving his Mercedes-Benz over the pot-holed roads of northern Albania, trying -- but not always succeeding -- to help families find peaceful resolutions to blood disputes. He has been working with the Kapsaris for five years.

Spahia says the strongest obstacle to reconciliation in the Kapsari case are the women in the rival family who refuse to give up the feud. He says, "Going on like this, victimizing a person for so long, is illogical." But, he adds, the kanun alone is not to blame for the Kapsaris' plight.

"The kanun, in fact, is the least of the evils we face at present. Currently, not even the kanun has any application. [The rival family] is violating God's law, the state's law, and the kanun -- all three. The only thing Albanians know how to do well now is rape, murder, deal in prostitutes, and loot. That's the tragedy of Albania."

Spahia adds that many Albanian families like the Kapsaris are suffering from a "total absence of human rights" because the state refuses to take seriously the growing problem of blood feuds. Last spring, the government promised to help the Kapsaris secure new identities and emigrate to Canada. But for now the family continues to wait, desperate to escape a way of life that seems to spring straight from the Dark Ages.

"I'm innocent," Ndoc Kapsari says. "Everyone is convinced I'm innocent, including the state. I look for help but no one is lifting a finger and this really surprises me. This is a democracy? What sort of rights do I have?"

# Family vows revenge for shooting

By Jesse Hogan

From <http://www.theage.com.au/>

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The victim's uncle Mohammed Chaouk, third from right, and other relatives remonstrate with police at the scene of the shooting.

Family members of a man shot dead in a police raid in Brooklyn this morning have made a very public vow to avenge his death.

As police and reporters waited outside where he was shot, a man stopped his car in the right lane of the Geelong Road, directly opposite the house.

He shouted obscenities at police from his car before speeding off and turning around, parking his car just behind the police barrier.

The man was later revealed as Mohammed Chaouk, the victim's uncle.

Mr Chaouk ducked under a police cordon and stormed towards his nephew's house, about 30 metres away.

He grappled with three police officers, who stopped him from going further.

The officers pushed Mr Chaouk to the ground and handcuffed him after he continued to struggle.

"You f----- killed him, you dogs," Mr Chaouk screamed.

"You take one of us and I'll take 10 of you."

Mr Chaouk's brother arrived soon after and was similarly combative, pushing officers as he attempted to get through the police cordon.

Both men, and their wives, repeatedly screamed at police, vowing revenge.

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Veteran homicide squad detective Charlie Bezzina calmed both men down, and Mr Chaouk was released without arrest.

Mr Chaouk later said he had been watching news of the shooting on television this morning and recognised the house.

He conceded his nephew may have been involved in criminal activity, but said the shooting was totally wrong.

"No one gets shot for nothing (but) they (police) can arrest him, they can do anything."

Relatives said the victim was Mahammed Chaouk, 29, who lived at the house. They originally believed the victim was his younger brother, Ali Chaouk, 24.

Two younger members of the family arrived soon after and continued the threats. A cousin, also named Ali Chaouk, said of the dead man: "He was a really good guy. He had a kind heart and wouldn't hurt anyone."

Despite seemingly having calmed down, Mr Chaouk twice returned to the police barrier to repeat the threats.

"We are family. We have to do these things," he said.

Mr Chaouk and his brother were eventually led away by their younger relatives and left the scene.

Soon after, a number of police went to their cars and put on bulletproof vests.

Another relative, who asked not to be named, said Mohammed Chaouk's threats should not be taken literally.

"He was obviously speaking out of emotion," the man said.

"He is devastated. Who wouldn't be devastated?"

The man said the extended family were unsure of exactly what had happened this morning.

The brothers were eventually led away by their younger relatives and left the scene.

Soon after, a number of police went to their cars and put on bullet-proof vests.